Home Retreat; Saturday 14 February 2026

"he isn't a write-off..is he?"

On 29 March 2025 I shared a Home Retreat on the story of the Prodigal Son entitled "I feel like turning just like him for home..that I may also start again" a fine moment as Lent began then, & for us now as our Lent begins this coming Wednesday, to start again..
..by looking again at the story of the Prodigal Son, when our own prodigal son story in life & faith has changed so much in the last 12 months..
as St John Henry Newman said "to live is to change, & to live fully is to change often" ..our scripture, our faith, our life relationships, change often, so I invite you to look again at the original gospel story & see what emerges from it for each of us five days before Lent begins..Lent as Fr Donal O'Leary, priest of Leeds Diocese, was to call it "a time to fall in love again with God."..a beautiful here & now..

last month I led a weekend retreat here on the Prodigal Son entitled "costing not less than everything"..17 retreatants & we opened the story together in five one hour long sessions, with time in between to share ponder pray & immerse in the experience..I hope to give you a taste of what we discovered in the next few minutes to yeast your Home Retreat day..

..essence of our faith is the progression from "come & see", to experience/encounter, & on to "go & tell"..heart of our calling into discipleship..from maintenance to mission..[sub-title of book Divine Renovation; Fr James Mallon]..Fr Mallon says "..old order of behaving/believing/belonging has been reversed..many today are willing to change lifestyle behaviour, but only if they truly believe in it themselves. Beliefs are changed not by preaching & teaching, but by building trust through relationships, through caring, through belonging."
..so now belonging/believing/behaving..
prospective new converts, seeking to belong, ask two questions of us: are we loving? & are we working for people especially the "outsider"?

[remembering the Amish]

..do please, later today, read through, not again but, as ever each time you hear it, listen to it for the first time, the Gospel of Prodigal Son Lk 15: 11-32
..can I please suggest some wisdom in listening to all I am about to share with you?
..don't attempt to hear everything at this first hearing, & the questions challenges & opportunities in it..I have copied out for you this full text & later today, or in days to come, you can read again the text & choose for yourself which moments in it you want to open address & discover yourself in..
I have split it into three sections..so the first..

Part .1. the choice, the voicing of the decision & the departure

"he also said" what had he just said previously? context two brief stories parable of lost sheep & lost drachma..hence this key text..a 30 mark challenge..
pushback by Jesus against closed minds of Pharisees & scribes against tax collectors & sinners..introducing the new universalism of Jesus' teaching & behaviour..his "difference" [behave/belief/belong]

"..a few days later.." why the delay? why did younger son leave? what was his hope/dream on leaving?..
"..got together everything he had & left for a distant country.." a first & final breakout..he took everything..nothing left to collect on a return visit, or store for an eventual return..a severing break off in relationship..divorce rather than separation..
clinical definitive..no forwarding address, no phone contact.."distance" an amputation..
..how would younger son have felt on severing ties with his family so definitively?..
..how did relationship between father & elder son change on younger sons departure?
"..where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery"..
..what might a plan A have looked like..his hopes dreams expectations & a first taste of possibility & eventual stirrings of growth & maturity?
..how did he cope in the plan B in which he found himself?..& thereby through which he discovered a real self?..
[the Prostitutes Story]..she in her misery taught [sowed first seeds in him] of humility hope & mercy..her self-sacrifice in love to let him go..

"..but no one offered him anything.." his real hunger malnutrition wasn't for physical food [he could have picked up any of husks in which he sat among pigs]. he was hungry for relationship..to be noticed by a Good Samaritan who would respond in loving service & offer him a husk..not a meal or bed for night or train ticket home but a husk [a cup of cold water]..
James in Mountjoy Prison 2001 a piece of stolen smelling apple pie "this is my body" "do this in memory of me"..

Part .2. the Gethsemane moment & the journey home

"..then he came to his senses.." key moment in whole story..
self realisation..a Gethsemane moment "kenosis"..Jesus' own pig sty moment..failure despair no one & nothing left..lonely abandoned bereft.."Father, take this cup of suffering from me" he couldn't pray sleep think..self abandonment..a void of nothingness..
& after how long on edge of oblivion..in his emptiedness, the Holy Spirit got inside him fully unimpeded like never before, to transform him from the inside..a seed of a future plan C..now crucially a divine plan C..after hours in the void, he found himself able to voice a future..an unknown future infused by an act of faith..

"let it be as you, not I would have it"..the road to Calvary..
"..into your hands Lord, I commend my spirit.." ..the self surrender on the Cross..
"..let it be done to me according to your word.." Mary's self surrender [kenosis?]

..the journey from "misery" to "mercy".. ..[Home Prayers; 15 Jan 2026]

"I will leave this place & go to my Father & say.."..a grain of hope & self esteem..
..to beg like Canannite woman for cure for her daughter.."Sir, Son of David, have pity on me"..no credentials, no proof of good standing, she had three disqualifications at least..yet in faith "take pity on me".."but he answered her not a word" [no prodigal father yet..she persisted & her faith gained her the miracle]

"while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, was moved with pity & ran to him"..father looking out for him..daily hourly watching road..seeing a figure a long way off raising hopes..then dashed at seeing it wasn't him..how long?..despondency despair each nightfall..yet few hours later, hope expectation is rekindled "perhaps tomorrow"..then the real sighting..moved with pity..at seeing him 6yrs older dishevelled/emptied, a vagrant..still my son & for always..he ran..an elder would never run..in doing so would lose all credibility/authority..[young John, running & reaching tomb before elder hurrying Peter, waited]..a mind blowing exception putting down marker for future generations..a game changer..lost his own dignity & in doing so gave some of it to his son..levelling up of Pope Benedict's meditation on Jesus & John "Simon son of John do you love me?"..Jesus reduces height of bar of expectation to a height he knew Simon could achieve as a personal best..it wasn't cotton wool protectionism but real mercy, given some individual self-resolve..

"..clasped him in his arms & kissed him tenderly.." Sieger Koder image in contrast to Rembrandt's "the Return of the Prodigal Son"..
Keith J White's commentary on Rembrandt's depiction..absence of father running..a formal almost liturgical welcome.."the relationship between the two could hardly be closer" really?..what is the figure in background looking at the viewer saying to us? in contrast to Sieger Koder's depiction..take time to ponder practice lectio on both..
..how each artist after prayer reflection intimacy with Our Lord paints two contrasting images from same text..& their inspiration prayer & wisdom..
..key is to be open to read translate imagine & learn from each..lectio in art..

"Father, I have sinned against heaven & against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son." "Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word & my soul shall be healed" son humbly professed his remorse ..no way did he expect nor voice a hope of full reconciliation..only a possible return as a "paid servant"..

..& "the liturgy of reconciliation"
"Quick!"..urgency making up for lost time lost years..notice disappointingly the father doesn't clothe his son..its all left to the servants..[Abbot clothes new novice..strikingly intimate..smiles of enjoyment] kill roast fatted calf "because this son of mine was dead & has come back to life; he was lost & is found"

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch; like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

2

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

3

The Lord hath promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

4

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun.

"..& they began to celebrate.."
[Willie & Shep in "the Steward of Christendom"; Sebastian Barry]

- Part .3. family consequences of reconciliation

"elder son out in fields, on way back, as he drew near to house, he could hear music & dancing"..end of his working day, tired hungry, wanting his meal & his own time off, free from duties responsibilities & the control of father..
..shock news via a servant.."your brother" a brother he had written off out of his life..
& to worsen situation "killed the family fatted calf" our social inheritance to be "lost" as well as our financial inheritance all those years ago..a second strike of assault abuse he was "angry & refused to go in" dug his heels in..non-cooperation..defiance..
"father came out to plead with him"..a day of all days he'd prayed & waited for & now it is here..icing on cake would be elder son's "homecoming" out of misery & into mercy..
& then the tirade in self justification..a workaholic in slave labour [the only incentive is knowing he will inherit the lot [the half left] once father dies..no signs of love or appreciation from father..no bonus or benefits..cold dutiful obedience.."never once disobeyed your orders" no sign or expression of love understanding compassion forgiveness "duty"..as Queen Elizabeth's clipped phrase.."duty first, self second"..
"your property..he & his women" no mention reference to himself..self referred outsider..[Sieger Koders image of room with no door & handcuff imagery of wrists]

& fathers final throw of dice..having journeyed himself from misery to mercy

"my son, you are with me always & all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate & rejoice, because your brother here was dead & has come to life: he was lost & is found." [amazing grace]

..& what happens next?..final chapter in story..like all best gospel stories it is left open ended for you to write in your own ending..

- I would like to offer you some homework some heartwork for you to open discover & meet yourself in, in addressing six questions in relation to all we have shared thus far this morning, & to gradually realise that the anwers you discover are lovingly related to your own prodigal son / prodigal daughter real-life real-faith experiences..
..the essence of this retreat work, its homework & heartwork, is to realise [bring to real life] our own stories & journeys.."he/she isn't a write off..is he?..is she?"..

The Return of the Prodigal

Five key questions:

[1] choose one character in the story..
what aspects of his behaviour or attitude deserves praise?
disappoints you?
surprises you?

[2] if you were to encourage one of the three to take on a leadership role in family for the next five years, who would you recommend & why?

[3] what one aspect of life would you recommend each goes away to work on in terms of personal development?

[4] if you were to introduce a fourth person into the story, who would it be? describe their personality and/or name the particular person from the Bible or from current life in the Church or in the world

[5] if one of the keys to collaborative ministry is the resolution of conflict [& the practice of synodality] which two characters would you bring together in the first instance, & what would you be listening for as they began to communicate?

[6] in which episodes of the story do you see the influence of the Holy Spirit working in & through each individual?

- Some lectio emerging from the January 2026 retreat as a whole..

"as younger son he was the spare"
"rebel & non-conformist"
"he isn't a write-off..is he?"
"I'd love a relationship like that, but I don't know how to start"
[father] "been a good master to his servants, which encouraged son to go back in hope of being accepted as one"
"still has enough love for elder son"
"how quick he forgave"
"how fully he restored his son..the signet ring mark of authority & trust ..the cloak of affirmation & reinclusion"

- ..& as we approach the beginning of Lent, & its challenges & opportunities to begin again in our closest relationships "to fall in love again with God" or with someone we have lost in recent weeks..or lost years ago..let us ask ourselves..

..who is my prodigal son? my prodigal daughter?
..who do I wait & pray for expectantly, daily/hourly, in the hope of a homecoming?
..are they physically / geographically distant?
..or do they live in same house/home/monastery as I do?
..who among us may feel as though we are "the spare"? but would never dare to voice it?
..who is the rebel & non-conformist?

..& perhaps the most challenging question emerging into this Home Retreat day for us ..for you & I to ponder on honestly, gently, devoutly, caringly, & lovingly is
"am I the prodigal? "

- ..some of the retreatants took up my invitation to go home & to write their own ending to the story, & some later shared them with me at length at depth, profoundly finding themselves in the narrative which emerged..gospel stories "good news" in their own right..
one concluded by introducing me to a new painter Eugene Burnand & his depiction of the Prodigal's father [1886/97] they write..
"what now? Eugene Burnand's Prodigal father comes to mind, with acres of fabric in his cloak, plenty of room in there for both sons & for us. How much of a step do we need to make towards him before he runs to meet us, arms outstretched?"
the only step we need to make, I suggest, is to get oneself into his line of sight, however distant, & once he sees us [again] he will begin his journey to us..& he says "so that I may also start again.."
..a time for him "to fall in love again with God"..with his Father..not just the wearer of the cloak like his Son, but the weaver of the fabric itself, the best of wedding garment for the homecoming & celebration of a lifetime..
..so, this coming Wednesday, clear the sightline..get yourself into his line of sight..

- ..some resources on line for you to include in this Home Retreat..

  ..my notes from this talk..read reflect get inside them
  & 6 poems notes reflections & 3 paintings..
  ..remembering the Amish
  ..gospel Lk 15: 11-32
  ..the prostitutes story
  ..Home Prayers 15 Jan 2026
  ..Pope Benedicts reflection on Jn 21.15
  ..Rembrandt's "the Return of the Prodigal Son"
  ..Sieger Koder's depiction
  ..Willie & Shep
  ..Eugene Burnand's "Prodigal Father"

- ..thank you for being with us this morning, for coming alongside me into the divine line of sight, & be sure of my prayers as you approach the father of the prodigal & Lent..

  ..on behalf of Abbot Robert & our Community I wish you a joyful & happy Lent

  [blessing]