

A Family In Need

However would you put up with being the father of that appalling elder son who *stayed in your house and slaved for you for years*? It seems that all the time he was nursing resentment because he had no parties, and because he hadn't squandered his father's money in a life of debauchery with a lot of women. Unlike his younger brother, who had escaped, and who had enjoyed lots of parties, and spent lots of money, he and his women.

A Gloomy Obedience

Imagine the sound and sight of this resentful creature, cheerlessly accomplishing his life like a slave. No wonder the father began to long for the return of his lost younger son, who probably had a bit of life in him. Perhaps one of the reasons he left home was precisely to get away from his elder brother. Do you think it is perverse of me to think in these terms? The obvious, churchy thing is to find no fault with the elder son - at least until he refuses to forgive. But I find great fault with him, because he is allowing himself to live "a good life" in a spirit of slavery. And it is dreadfully wrong to do the right thing for the wrong reasons. We ought to realise this, because unless we do, the real joy of belonging to God will never come to us. This boy gives obedience a bad name. His father doesn't want him to be like that, and he will certainly have made the house a very grim, joyless, hopeless, oppressive place.

What Of The Boy Who Left?

There's nothing against him for leaving home. Jewish firstborn sons inherit the whole farm; they have to pay their brothers to leave home and go for it in the world. It's only when he wastes his share in the inheritance that he goes wrong. He goes wrong, ultimately, for ending up in a pig-sty. Still, he is his father's son. He is loved for who he is, and even though he doesn't believe this, it happens to be the truth. So his homecoming is actually the right thing to do: even though he too does it for the wrong reason. He does it because he thinks there'll be a job for him, and he can make good some of his losses. A mean plan, of course, and we don't think his voice will tremble as he says *I no longer deserve to be your son*. It's the right thing to do because his father does love him, and the banquet is the sign of this love. The party is unlooked-for, but for all that it is the

real reason why it's the right thing for him to come home. And it's also the right reason why we should come home; not that we deserve anything through our deeds, but because our father loves us so much. The reasons for everything are in God, and not in us. That's what makes us sad when we stay imprisoned in ourselves. We're cut off from the real purpose of our lives, the real reasons for our joy. They're not in us, but in God.

A Moment Of Crisis

The killing of the fatted calf is actually a moment of crisis, because it's the moment when the love of the father suddenly explodes into the lives of his two sons. Crisis means judgment. The wandering son finds himself exalted and honoured (robe and ring) restored to the management group (sandals) and welcomed to the plenty (calf) of the father's house. (Luke has fastidiously not mentioned the essential *bath* with which he must first have been greeted, to get the pig-pen out of his hair and skin. But there must have been one.) Thus is judgment wrought upon the wanderer, and no doubt it was a dizzying experience of unexpected love. But it is also a critical moment for the time-serving elder son out in the fields. His bitterness goes off like a time-bomb whose moment has come. All his obedience, all his fidelity, revealed for the sad things they are; and he is then stuck outside the ancestral home - and *well* outside the banquet - in the sweat and toil which has become his physical and spiritual uniform. I feel very sorry for him, but I hope I'll never be like him.

A Moment Of Revelation

If these two boys are to make any further progress, they must *both* learn to place their hearts in the heart of their father. He has plenty to teach the pair of them; in their separate ways they're both completely ignorant of their father, and therefore of themselves and of each other. The bitter little title *This son of yours* is gently corrected by the father to *this brother of yours!* In some way the elder brother must not only accept the pardoning, but receive it himself. Both must change, and become like the father, who is himself ready and waiting to create a joyous celebration when the family comes home. And us: do we believe that the Father will do this for us?

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