

Few stories from Jesus can be more familiar than this one. It is also a universal story: because all of us leave our parents to make our way and our life, leaving behind us a good or a bad atmosphere. Mothering Sunday bears witness to an enduring relationship which grows and develops into adulthood only when the break has been made. (Blow your nose properly.) When we come to apply this story to the situation we are in with God the Father, we find the endless depths of it. We're living in a period where the greater part of our contemporaries seem to have no time for the Father or the Father's house. They hope to receive the family inheritance in its fulness; they may even claim the title of *Christian* as if it comes with the package of being British. They want to live well, be happy, and taste the good things of the earth; and they imagine that this is their right - so much so, that if something is lacking, they are ready to turn to crime to supply it. There is a tremendous presence of criminality in our country; try leaving a briefcase or a purse on the floor outside Marks and Spencer's. You will be astonished how quickly it is scooped up. Does this mean the world is full of criminals? Perhaps not; but it is full of people who see little wrong with exploiting a stroke of luck, in recompense for all the unfairness they think they suffer.

The idea of living in relationship with the Father is a kind of embarrassment to people. They pretend they've grown out of it, that it's a set of fairy stories for children, that the real world is now, and to be seized with full attention. But there is a certain residue of guilt which shows itself in graceless mockery of faith, hope and love; a cynical front which delights to find religion false or hypocritical, as if this could justify the decision never to think of God. Some people are furiously atheist, because they are so uncertain of their own justice, and sense the quiet memory of the Father as an enemy factor, sown in them by an enslaving past.

Their greatest ally in building up this syndrome is the elder brother, the one who stayed at home - could it be you and me? We try to do what's right, and if we succeed we might say to the Father *I have never once disobeyed you*. But we also say, *All these years I have slaved for you*. If those who think they obey God also think they are slaves, how can we fault those who cast off the traces, for thinking that we want to enslave them as well? Take a Lenten look at yourself: does the joyous light of freedom burn in you, as you keep the law and try to live life to the full, as Jesus told us to? Or do you look across at the irresponsible world, the wine, women and song, the stolen freedom that wastes the inheritance, thinking, *The grass is greener for some?*

The story is a story of mercy, in that the money runs out, the famine breaks, and the royal road leads into the hungry pigsty. This doesn't always seem to happen in the real world, but it happens in our story. In a moment of grace, the possibility of coming home dawns on the victim, and the return begins. Grace came for him in a cloaked form, looking like disaster; and his polluted heart cannot rise to real conversion. He simply wants a job and food, and like a worldling son of Adam, he will even consent to work for it

The Father's running out to meet him warms all our hearts, and the generous feast begins a new chapter in their relationship; *now I will show you a Father's love*. But the elder brother is still to be dealt with. And let us try to identify with him. Stung to the quick, confined in his bleak slavery, mean to the core, he is as trapped in himself as someone totally unloved. He is at least as afflicted as his penniless brother; with this difference, that the penniless brother is robed, ringed and sandalled, and seated at a feast in his Father's house; and our boy is lonely, fuming, filthy, bursting with bitterness, and above all *outside*.

We must learn as soon as we can the terms of relationship. Not *My Father* but *Our Father*; and not *this son of yours*, but *this brother of mine, who was dead and has come back to life; who was lost, and is found*. Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate - so that you may truly be children of the Father who causes his sun to shine on just and unjust alike. God says to us today: *Everything I have is yours - you are with me always!* May these words come true for all of us.