



Fourth Sunday of Epiphany
Sunday 29 January 2012

Lost and Found

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Readings: 2 Corinthians 4, 5-12; Luke 15.11-end

“What should I say about homelessness?” I asked the Spirituality Group at The Connection at St Martin’s shortly before I was to write last December’s Christmas Appeal. Lesley was quick to reply, “Well I don’t know why they always call us ‘The Homeless’. I mean, I don’t call them ‘The In-Houses.’ I mean, after all we are all just people.” I couldn’t agree more. If I’ve learnt anything these last six years working at St Martin-in-the-Fields, and talking to the many homeless people who come in here and getting to know some of the clients at The Connection – the one thing I know more clearly than ever before, is that we are all just *people*. So the first thing I want to say today is there is no such thing as ‘the homeless’. There are many different people, all completely unique, all with their own story to tell and their own reasons that have led them to a life on the streets. Of course when you begin to hear those stories there are sometimes common themes – perhaps poverty, or relationships that have gone wrong or broken down, or problems of addiction, or migration with no papers and no support, or a lost job, or a period of mental illness or depression, or lack of family, or things that have led them into trouble. But over and over again one is also made aware that homeless people could in different circumstances be any of us.

A few weeks ago I was travelling on an aeroplane. It was a very long journey in Economy class with no legroom, and two people you needed to climb over to get to the toilet. As we lined up in the waiting lounge at Singapore Airport during refuelling, I heard a woman say to the man she was travelling in a very loud voice “I think this is absolutely disgusting. I mean we’ve paid for First Class tickets and we are just being made to line up with everybody else – and herded like cattle.” “Excuse me,” I said to her “just because you have got more money than us, why does it mean you deserve better treatment? And why does it mean that we are just cattle? I mean, we are all just people.” Of course, I didn’t really say that, I just kept quiet – one of the cattle. But I felt it. Why because someone has more money and more privilege should they be treated with more respect or dignity? It beats me. Don’t we all, all of us, deserve respect and dignity, whatever our wealth or bonuses or lack of them; whatever the size of our home, or even if we have no home at all? Are we not all people? Why is it that some should be allowed to be more people than others?

Two weeks ago at the beginning of my group at The Connection I asked each person in the group to tell of one good thing that had happened to them since we had last met the week before Christmas. One of the older members of the

group, was looking really smart and he spoke of his time at Crisis at Christmas. He told of how they had had the chance to do different things – like have his hair cut, and how there was a podiatrist who had done his feet, and, with no hint of embarrassment, he told of how he had had his fingernails cut and manicured and polished, so that they felt clean and smooth. Another woman told the group she had had a bath, a real, bath, a hot, slow bath and it had felt so good. Another talked about the Christmas Dinner they had had at The Connection on Christmas Day. Another of the group told of the way at Christmas they had been asked if they needed anything, as a Christmas present, and that she had asked for training shoes. He told how he had expected to receive some old training shoes that were too big or too small, but that the present he had been given was not just any old shoes, but good training shoes that were his exact size and exactly what he had asked for. Each good moment, it struck me, involved a moment of being treated with dignity and respect. And I thought of my own good moments, when I had witnessed that same liberating generosity, dignity and respect – when I heard that the Christmas Appeal total had gone over a million pounds, and saw the bags of letters coming in full of donations from people who had heard and cared, and Alison Hardwick and the ladies downstairs counting the cheques and replying to the donations with such devotion; or getting to the end of the Christmas Day Service with no voice but realising it didn't matter because it was Christmas Day and my mother who has been struggling with getting older and the pain of arthritis was in the congregation and said it was one of the most beautiful services she had ever been to. Moments like this are moments of a greater dignity and meaning when we glimpse a homecoming.

The Gospel today tells us the Parable of the Lost Son, a very well known story both of loss, but also of homecoming. In this story both of the sons are in their own ways lost. One is lost and far away, cut off, guilty and in desperate need – cut off from love. But the other, the son who has stayed at home and has done everything right is also in his own way lost, because he is filled with resentment. Both are very recognizable conditions in our society today. The lost son, in a far away place, eating the food the pigs eat – is the person trapped by circumstances, perhaps of their own making, perhaps because things went wrong; they made wrong choices, perhaps they failed, were misguided, fell on hard times, were mistreated, got exploited, messed up – the point is they feel lost. But the other son is also so much in evidence in our society, the one poisoned by the thinking “Why should others have what I've always had to work for? Why should my brother live on a handout when he's never done a decent days work? What about me! Why should he get more than me? He's wasted all he had!” Haven't you heard that voice of the older brother before? It sounds a bit like the Daily Mail editorial, or the retired Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey. And in a way the older brother is right. Yet it is not the truth of the story. It is not God's truth. The truth of the story is that both sons, both of them, belong equally to the Father.

There is a line in the Parable of the Lost Son that I have always loved. It comes right at the moment when the youngest son feels he can't go any lower and things can't get any worse. The words are “he came to himself and said...” Came to himself. It is as though in the depths of his despair he sees himself as he is, acknowledges his own humanity, and all that has gone wrong. It is as though, at the very bottom of the fall, he has arrived at a moment of truth.

Here, there is a memory, a memory of goodness, that another way is possible. It is like the prayer of his father breaking through. Because in the story, we are told that the father is still watching and waiting and loving. God's love is incomplete without the beloved. You could say this love of the father is pure foolishness, it's undeserved, it's wasteful, perhaps this is true, but it can be no other way. Because it's not about balancing the budget, or austerity measures, it's about the longing we all have for those we love and what it means to be found by love and restoring one another with dignity and respect. It is amazing grace! Look at Rembrandt's picture that hangs in front of us. Who is the lost and who is the found? The obvious answer is that the youngest son with his torn feet and ragged clothes is the lost one, now being held like a child in his father's mother's womb, the red of the cloak like the embracing wings of protection, with the father's two hands laid on the son's bowed shoulders, one like a father's hand, one like a mother's hand. But look again. It is the lost son who seems in this picture to be filled with golden light, lighting up the face of his father. It's as if the son is the greatest treasure of all, and he is. The son needs the father but the father also needs the son to be complete. The lost son has become the Christ figure.

But in this story there is also the other son, the judge, the one who sees rightly that it is not fair – a third character, perhaps, in this picture, peering out of the shadows in the background. Will he ever accept his younger brother back again? The choice will be his. Perhaps he will continue to argue how unfair the situation is. But as we look into this picture we sense too that he will remain in the shadow himself unless he too can find in himself the generosity of heart to enter into relationship again with both his brother and his father. “Which of these characters *are you?*” the story seems to be asking us. Perhaps at different times we are each of these.

Last year, on November 11th we remembered all those who had died homeless, each one with their own uniqueness, hopes, fears – not a type, but a human being, with the myriad complexity of you and me. Each one who died is represented on the road down the centre of our church with a set of footprints. The footprints lead us to the torn feet of the prodigal – the one who, experiencing the despair of loss, finally comes home. Each one of those one hundred and forty-six sets of feet is a person deserving dignity and respect. And those footsteps also represent you and me and the journey we all make – the long and winding road – as we too seek in the successes and failures of our own lives to find out who we are and where we belong.

Every week when I visit The Connection at St Martin's I always return feeling somehow more human, with a greater dignity and respect both for myself and for others. The Connection at St Martin's is a place of hope. And when I go there it is often as though like that Lost Son, I have reconnected with something deeper in our common humanity. There is nothing romantic, or idealistic about this. There is, not surprisingly, anger and a sense of frustration at the injustice and a longing for people to have another chance and a future. But there is also a truthfulness in this encounter – as though the masks behind which we live have been torn away and there is no pretence behind which to hide. And in that place of exposure there is a greater honesty, a deeper humanity, a realisation before God that there is no first class or second class, or sub-class or homeless, but we are equal, totally equal, totally

equal in our humanity – that we are all just people. Longing for dignity and respect, longing to bestow dignity and respect on others. Longing to belong. Is this not an example of what a church should be? When I asked one of my Connection group one good thing that had happened to him he said “Nothing good has happened to me at all,” and he began to cry. Macdonald, who is also homeless, sitting next to him, very quietly gently and with respect, passed him his clean handkerchief.