

Sermon Preached at Marlborough College – Sept 18th 2016

These Syrian families should not be allowed to come to our country – they get houses when we have our own people on housing waiting lists; they get taught English by specially selected tutors when some of our own children struggle to read and write; they get social benefits when our own people need to be looked after. They should go home.

This is a view we hear increasingly on the streets of Britain today, and on TV interviews. They should go home. Yet, any of us who have seen reports on the city of Aleppo over the last few days, will know that there is no home left to return to. The streets are mounds of rubble where people's apartments used to be – piles of concrete have now replaced once elegant streets and markets selling fresh

produce. Those who have remained are now eating grass to stay alive.

Some home this to send them back to! Home should be a place of security, of rest, of love, of families growing up together, of gathering around the table for meals. Yesterday in Cirencester I blessed the home of a young couple who have just moved into their first property, and I prayed for all those things as I went round sprinkling each room with holy water and praying that their home should be a place of delight and tenderness.

The gospels often use the language of home, and of home-coming. In St. John's gospel Jesus often refers to us 'making our home with him' having our abode with him – live in the life of the vine. The divine calling to each of us is that we return home to live with God – you could almost say that this sums up the gospel message; 'return home to God.'

This message is superbly captured by a Dutch artist called Rembrandt. He takes the powerful passage of St. Luke that we heard today and illustrates in oil and canvass how he understands the message of the parable that Jesus tells us.

In today's story, and in that Rembrandt picture, we have a father whose son has gone off and basically wasted his life. On his return the father blesses him and puts on a party for him. We have his other son; he is miffed because of all the fuss with his brother. 'Dad, you've never put on a party for me, yet you're doing it for this no-good brother of mine'. To his right there is someone sitting – we don't know who, but he has a moustache. It is a very male dominated picture – so I apologize for that, but the story about the inheritance only works with males at that time and in that culture.

However if you look closely in the shade of the picture there is a female figure. I like to think this

is Mum to the two boys and the female face that represents the heartache of loss and the wounded joy of home-coming.

Why does Jesus tell this story? He tells it to illustrate God, to illustrate what you and I are like, to illustrate the truth about religion and our relationship with God. The father in the story is God, the 2 sons are you and me – 2 types of people, one out having a good time, taking risks and hang the whole lot of them, the other self righteous, safe, always judging and bad mouthing ('dissing' they say now) people who are not like us.

These people should just go back home – do you remember I started with that? The gospel message is that we all need to return home. If we are to flourish, be absolutely true to ourselves, to find our purpose, to get our religion right, then we must all return home to God our Father. This is the Christian faith in a nutshell. I think this is what all

faith is about, not just for Christians. And in case we find the male imagery of the story offensive and exclusive, we just need to look at the picture again, to that woman in the shadow. Here too is the face of a mother worried sick about her boy. God is Father, but not male, God is mother but not female but this parable is not about gender, but about home-coming. We can recite the Creeds, as we often do; we can make claims about the bible, as we often do, but nothing is more powerful than knowing that God is waiting for us, longing for us, yearning for us, to return his love for us and come home. 'Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off, you met us in your Son and brought us home.'

Don't you think this is a wonderfully powerful and beautiful thing that God does for us – he strains himself to restore the delight of being at home with him, and no matter what we have done, no

matter how arrogant we have been, God stands on the balcony looking out to see where we are, to see how we are, and most importantly to wait for our return. When we do there is great rejoicing in heaven for you and me as God stretches out his arms and embraces us. This is the very moment that Rembrandt captures. Just imagine if Rembrandt's picture could have gone viral those 400 years ago.