

1. Two brothers

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[0 : 00] Pointe Recently a friend of mine who lives hundreds of years, hundreds of miles away from here, rang me and he said to me, Rika, I'm reaching out.

My doctor says I've had a bit of a breakdown. Really, it's because I've spent years lying to people about the products I sell them and the pressure of that has now broken me. I'm also missing my children desperately since the divorce. Christmas was agony without them.

And furthermore, a great friend of mine has just lost his young wife. He is distraught. He rings me and I have no idea what to say to him. Rika, I'm reaching out. Do you know, in our culture it takes quite a lot for someone to say something like that, to ring up in our individualistic, self-sufficient culture and say I'm reaching out.

And the question is, what do you say? What do you say to someone who rings and says that sort of thing? Well, to be honest, I really would want to take my friend to this story that we've just had read to us.

Because it's about life. It explains life. It's about being human. It's about the mess that life can be. It's about having the courage sometimes to look in the mirror and say, you know, despair is not far away or am I the only one?

[1 : 34] It's about the courage to say, actually, I'm just hanging on by my fingernails at this point in time. And of course, this is about broken relationships, broken domestic relationships.

And all of us, to one degree or another in the British culture, know about that. But above all, this is all about a relationship of such generosity, such love, that it can change any life, that it can turn any life around.

That's why it's the most famous short story ever told. Because, you see, this short story has such power, such meaning, such pathos, that it changes lives. Maybe it'll do that for you now in this 20 minutes we have before us.

So let's look at it together, the story. I hope you've got it in front of you. It'd be lovely if you could open up the sheet that Willie read for us and we could have a look. And it's, to summarise it, a family story. It's about a father who has two sons.

A friend of mine tells it very neatly. He says, it goes a bit like this, Rico. It starts at home. Then the younger son gets sick of home. So he gets out and he finally eventually just goes to being plain sick. So he goes to being homesick. It ends with him being home again.

[2 : 38] His father's thrilled to have him home. He throws a party and the older brother feels sick about that. He says, basically, that's the story. And the story goes like that. And as we read the story, it becomes obvious that the father in the story is like God.

And the two boys, the two sons, are like the two constituencies of people listening to the story that Willie read for us at the start. Chapter 15, verse 1, the tax collectors and sinners.

That is the younger son's constituency. And the older son's constituency are the Pharisees and teachers of the law, chapter 15, verse 2. And here's the issue. This is why it's such a famous short story.

Jesus intends all of us to see ourselves in the story. So it's as though he holds up a mirror and he says, you have a walk on part too. Because you'll be identifiable with one of these two brothers.

That's why it's such a famous short story. You see, we're all in it. We all have a walk on part. So let's look at these two boys and see ourselves. And first of all, can you see in this story, I've only got two points, that there is a deceptive contrast between these two boys.

[3 : 44] And that happens, and we'll see that as we begin with the younger son. It's a deceptive contrast. And that's at the start, verse 11, if you can look down. There was once a man who had two sons. And the story begins with the younger son.

He's what you might call the out-and-out rebel. And the younger one said to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate. So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together.

All he had set off for a distant country. Now this younger son cuts loose. He takes what would have been his later on, and he says, Dad, Dad, do you remember that life insurance policy you've taken out from me?

Yeah. Well, Dad, I'd like my share now. And the father says, well, actually, son, those things only mature when I'm dead. And the younger one says, yeah, Dad, you've got the point. I wish you were dead.

That's what he's saying. I mean, that's when you get your parents' inheritance, when they die. And he says, Dad, I wish you were dead. So you see, this younger boy, in effect, is saying, Dad, I want your things, but I don't want you.

[4 : 44] And there are many people who treat God like that. They just walk out on him. They act as though he doesn't exist, as though he's an irrelevance. So they take the good things of God, fun, family, friends, falling in love, food, fitness.

They take the good things, but they don't want him. And their slogan, it's very striking, and it's there in verse 12. I wonder if you can see it. The younger one said to his father, Father, give me.

You just give me the gifts, and you get out of it. I know I get each breath from you, but actually I'm ignoring you, and I'll run my life without you. And I think the question is, what was it that so attracted this younger man to life without God?

And surely the answer is independence. This was his independence day. He was saying to his father, I don't need you. And I wonder if you can imagine how great he was feeling as he walked down the drive with the remains of the life insurance in his back pocket.

So his wallet absolutely swelled, and he's walking out, and he says, I'm free. I'm away from him. And he's convinced, you see, that pleasure will make him happy.

[5 : 50] So independence, wild living pleasure, that is the key to happiness. And give me, and he's gone. Well, that's the younger son. Let's have a look at the older son.

He's what you might call the establishment figure, and we learn a bit about him in verse 29 at the end of the parable. And again, the mirror's being lifted up to us. And we see him in verse 29 as he has a row with his father outside his brother's party.

Verse 29, and he tells us a bit about himself. Look, all these years I've been slaving for you, and I've never disobeyed your orders. Do you see? He's the dutiful child. He's joined the family firm.

He's hardworking. He's loyal. You know, he's something boring, isn't he? Like a solicitor or an accountant or something like that. It's obvious, isn't it? Yeah, sorry. And where the father is, he's close around.

And you see, if you'd expect to see the father in the Tron Sunday morning, or as an elder, you know, you'd see the son there too. He's a dutiful child.

[6 : 51] He's a fine, upstanding chap. He's respectable at every level. He's very different from his brother, but it's a deceptive contrast. He's not like his brother, but he's nothing like his father either.

You see, verse 28, if you can see, if you look down, the older brother, when the younger son comes home, became angry and refused to go in. So when the younger son returns, the father's glad, the brother's angry.

The father greets him with open arms, the brother with clenched fists. The father says, my son, verse 30, can you see it? It's so fascinating, verse 30. The brother says, this son of yours, he says, I'm not even from the same room as that man.

I'm not even in the same gene pool. So you see, this older brother thought he was the model of unselfishness. But actually, all he can think about is himself.

One commentator has said, the older son contrived without leaving home to be as far away from his father as ever his brother was in the pigsty. Do you see, it's a deceptive contrast. If you want to think about God and the Christian faith this Easter week in terms of religion, then these two boys are very different.

[7 : 57] But if you want to think about God in terms of relationship, which is how we're called to think about God, well, these two boys are very similar.

You see, it's a deceptive contrast. They're both out of sorts with their father. One's religious, the other's not. One's respectable, the other's not. They're both out of relationship with their father. And I guess, as we draw to a close on the first point, if you're in the younger son's constituency, you know that.

And thank you for wandering in today. It's great to have you. But are you an older brother, a respectable, conventional type? But if you're honest, your religion has as much in common with relationship with God as a frigid marriage has in common with a real, lifelong love story.

And if I may say, I think you will know whether you're an older brother type by this diagnostic question. Let me give it to you here. And this was exactly the Anglicanism that I grew up with.

You'll know if you're an older brother type if your religion makes you feel superior to other people. So actually, underneath, you go through life thinking, actually, do you know what this country needs?

[9 : 11] Are more moral, law-abiding, tax-paying, good citizens like me. At least I do my duty. If only there were more people like me. The religion I grew up with, the Anglicanism I grew up with, we put suits on on Sunday.

And do you know, I hate to say it, but I'm sorry, it's the truth. It was to make us feel superior to others. It was about a middle-class superiority. It's a deceptive contrast between these boys.

Well, that's the first point. Secondly, they both make an amazing discovery. That's my second point. They discover they're both equally welcome with their father. It's true in both, but it's more striking with the younger son.

So let's have a look at it. Verse 13, could you see, he's relishing his independence, he's enjoying pleasure, he's squandering his wealth in wild living, he's getting everything he desired, alcohol, promiscuity, but he finds that though wild living leads to instant gratification, the Bible doesn't deny that, he squandered his wealth, he wasted his life.

And the word is hollow, verse 13, squandered, it's got a sense of hollowness in the original. You've only got one life and he wasted it. And what this young man finds is not freedom, but bondage.

[10 : 25] It's amazing, he leaves home to be free, but he finds himself in a pigsty and he's utterly alone and it's summed up at the end of verse 16. It's so striking, can you see? But no one gave him anything as the money runs out.

So he finds that actually when he had the money he was fine, but actually, I think people divide in life into two halves, don't they? Givers and takers. And this man is surrounded by takers.

So he ends up with no money, no friends, no job. And he's incredibly alone and now we get the turning point in the story, verse 17. Do we see as we look down? When he came to his senses, so he suddenly goes, how could I have been so blind?

He suddenly sees himself in a pigsty, how could I have missed this? How could I have been so ungrateful? How could I have missed the obvious? You see, suddenly, he comes to his senses as he's in the pigsty.

And he sees himself as he really is and he sees his father as he really is and he begins to surrender his precious delusions about independence and he admits he's lost, things are falling apart, but he doesn't just lack food, he lacks his father and do you know what he begins to long for?

[11 : 31] He begins to long for home. Can we see as we look down? Verse 17. How many of my father's hired men have food to spare? I'll set out and go back to my father.

Can you see he's longing for home? Now what is home? Home isn't a place. Home is relationship. Isn't that right? That's real home. Home is the place where I belong and I'm accepted.

Those of us who've had the privilege of coming from homes where we know that we're loved. One psychiatrist has said, children who don't experience a home live all their lives with a fundamental inability of attachment.

And you see, what this young man finds, and this is why he longs for home, is he finds that when the money runs out, all his relationships are conditional. We will love you if you're young, if you're good looking, if you're successful, if you're rich.

So love comes with a price tag, but the amazing thing about home is that you're loved anyway. They know what you're like and they love you anyway. And that's why he longs for home.

[12 : 35] And if I may say, I think there's a terrible drivenness in our society today and it's because people often haven't experienced home so they have been taught unless you win, we will not love you.

So there's this drivenness. I must win, I must succeed or I won't be loved. At home, you're loved anyway. And so can you see what this boy does? He does the most incredibly difficult thing.

It's there in verse 18. I'll set out and go back to my father and say, Father, I've sinned against you another word, Father, I'm sorry. Don't you hate doing that? I hate saying sorry.

When I've got to say sorry to someone, I pick up the phone and think, I've got to ring them and say sorry and then I think, just have a cup of tea first, put the phone, and I delay it all day. I hate it. And the Bishop of London recently was speaking, he said, London's biggest problem is BSE.

We looked at each other, BSE, he said, yes, blame somebody else. I hate saying sorry. And I don't know if, I mean, I speak of marriage now with all the reckless courage of a non-combatant, but I've been told in married life the two crucial phrases, and actually, as I say this, if you are with your spouse, can you keep your elbows in please?

[13 : 43] I don't want to see them flying out left and right, but I'm told in marriage the two most crucial phrases are, I'm sorry I was wrong, and some people will never say sorry, and that's okay, I love you, and some will never forgive, but this boy knows he needs to say sorry.

He knows he's got to say sorry to his father, so can you see what happens? And now we come to the heart of the story as we look down. Let's have a look and see what happens. So he got up and went back to his father, but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him.

Now what does his father do? Does his father stand on the porch and go, this better be good? This better be good! What's his father going to do? Can you see? It's very striking. His father saw him, was filled with compassion.

Now that's a word for a turning of the stomach. It's what we feel as we see the tsunami and what it's done to people. His stomach turns his father and can you see what happens? As he sees him, he ran to his son.

What do you think he did? Do you think he ran across one of the fields they'd had to sell? He ran to his son. And has anyone, by the way here, ever seen the queen run? Ever seen that good lady run?

[14 : 48] Well in this culture, I think I'd have a breakdown if I saw her run. I just can't imagine it. It'd make me feel insecure. He runs to his son.

It wasn't done in the culture but he runs. And now it gets very un-British. It's so embarrassing. And he kissed him. It's present continuous. My father and I, before bed, I'll say goodnight father, goodnight, and all we can manage is a shake of the hand.

We're so psychologically screwed up. But this bloke throws his arms around his father. And his father throws his arms around him. Can you see? He throws his arms around him and he kisses him and it goes on and on.

And what Jesus is telling us here is something so important. And that is that how do you know the father's kiss? And can you see how that happens?

I mean it's one thing to know that your father loves you but it's another to have him embrace you. How in relationship with God do we know the father's embrace? Can you see? Verse 17. You come to your senses and you say do you know it is at home where I belong and I'm accepted.

[15 : 50] And then you say God I'm sorry. That's how I know the father's embrace when I say I'm sorry Lord.

And I just think that's why this week let's start again with our Bible reading in the morning. Because as we look at the Bible I was looking at Colossians 3 this morning and I saw my wrongdoing and I said I was sorry and I felt the father's embrace.

And if you've stopped then let's start again. It would be a great week to start. And his father's sitting there saying son where are you? Where are you? And you see the amazing thing about this boy is he has totally underestimated his father's generosity.

That's the issue here. You see as he comes home his father doesn't grind his face into the dust. His father says get the ring get the robe kill the calf. And that's my friend you know that rang me I just wish he could understand God's generosity.

About a couple of years ago I was at home on my day off teaching my nephews to scrummage. They're called Dalton and Patrick. Dalton's six Patrick's two and a half and as I was down scrummaging with Dalton teaching him to scrummage in my parents sitting room Patrick the two and a half year old got so excited that he picked up a large plant pot and he started to empty it while I wasn't looking because I was down and to make a pitch.

[17:10] And when I next looked up there was mud all over all over the sitting room and at that point my mother known affectionately in the family as the Ayatollah walked in so she walked in the door it's a total matriarchy my family.

The only independent decision my father has made in 45 years of marriage as far as I can see is recognise Angola as a sovereign state. Anyway my mother walked in and the floor was trashed and there was this little two and a half year old holding the plant pot and she looked at him and she walked over to him and she picked up the plant pot and she put it on one side and she picked up this little boy and she kissed him and she said let's go and have lunch and as she carried him out of the room across the soil he looked over her shoulder at Dalton and I on the ground and he went like that.

You see the thing about Patrick is he knows his grandmother knows what he's done he knows that she loves him he knows that she'll clear up the mess and I'd like to say having been a Christian 20 years that my relationship with God is different from that but it is no different he knows what I've done he keeps clearing up the mess and I keep experiencing this incredible unconditional love and if only people could understand that generosity and come home and it was fortunate wasn't it you see as we come to this story that the younger son was seen by his father on the road and not by his brother because his brother wouldn't have been so generous not least because as we look down as we draw to a close because of the last verse can we see where the father says my son you're always with me and everything I have is yours so do you realise that means that the calf belonged ultimately to the older brother everything I have is yours it was going to belong to him the ring was the older brother's the robe was the older brother's it was no small thing for this younger son to come home there was a cost involved and this stingy older brother was never going to pay it but amazingly as a Christian

I have a different older brother Romans 8 verse 29 tells me that the Lord Jesus is my older brother he is my older brother and he's not stingy or selfish like this one he earned the robe he earned the ring he lived a perfect life and yet what happened as we head into Good Friday he was stripped and they cast lots for his robe he didn't get the fattened calf at the cross he got hyssop and vinegar and at the cross the Lord Jesus says to us the only way for you to be clothed is for me to be stripped the only way for you to get the robe and the ring is for me to lose mine and ultimately the only way for you to come home is if I die and pay in death and blood for you to come home so you see there is only one way in which I can go to hell there is only one way to go to hell it is to trample over the cross of the Lord Jesus who stands before us this week and he says will you please go home and I am blocking the way to hell paying in death and blood but if we want to you see we can just trample over the cross we can do that we can do that this week but this true older brother says don't do that

I have paid for you to go home and it is very interesting isn't it that what is it that stops what is it that stops this older brother going home and going into the party can you see it is in verse 29 it is very striking but he answered his father this is as he has his row outside with his father look all these years I have been slaving for you never disobeyed your orders what will stop me going home what will stop me this Easter week taking advantage of the cross is actually my own goodness look all these years I have been slaving for you if I am saying this week look I am a good person well of course then I have no need to go to the cross and seek forgiveness I have got no need to say I am sorry so the weapon of rebellion that this older brother had against God and it is all over the Anglicanism I grew up with is his own goodness and my grandmother died absolutely believing that God would accept her because she was good I watched her die from the 1st to the 7th of April 1988 and that is what put me into the ministry to watch someone die totally trusting in their own goodness she saw no need of needing God's forgiveness

[21 : 46] I am good he will accept me because of all I have done and that is a million miles from the Christian faith the Christian faith is all about saying Lord Jesus please will you pay in death and blood for me to be forgiven so that I can go home and we don't know how these two boys ended up we don't know we don't know if the younger one was a flash in the pan we don't know if the older one went in we don't know and the reason we don't know is that we are to finish the story and this week I wonder if you'll come back each day and I'll be speaking and we'll be looking and getting more information so that we can write our own endings but I guess there might be one or two here and you're actually saying gosh I don't have the information to get home and there's this course Christianity Explained which will be a help for you and may I recommend that let's pray together let's pray so I'm sorry I'm sorry but I'm sorry I might not have anything anything I'll be sorry about my and... I'll be other words as in