

10am Communion Service WEEK B

Sunday 11 January 2026

God who provides: FORGIVEN

Luke 15:11-32

Pray

Over the last couple of weeks I've been doing something at home that I really enjoy. Clearing stuff out, moving things around, bringing clutter into order and making space for the new. It began with a decision to replace one piece of furniture in one room, and before you know it, the domino effect meant that hardly a room in the house was left unchanged. The whole exercise has involved a couple of visits to the tip and to charity shops, and lots of hours spent moving things from here to there!



Whenever I go through this kind of process I discover things in my home that are no longer needed. However simply we try to live, overtime we will inevitably accumulate things that are no longer fit for purpose. **But are there things that we will always need?** What are the essentials for a healthy, fulfilling

life? It would be easy enough to list the practical things that humans require – food, water, shelter, companionship and so on. But what about our emotional needs, **what does every person need in order to be content in their heart, mind and soul?**

It is these things that we will be exploring in our new series called '**God provides**'. God won't always give us what we want, but He **does offer us** the things that we need. Over the coming weeks we'll be reflecting on our need to feel held, safe, connected, purposeful and empowered, and today, as Simon has shared, we will begin with our need to be forgiven. And it's the right place to begin, because from it, everything else flows.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, familiar to many of us, is a story of homecoming. It is a story of forgiveness that ends with a celebration. Our other needs – to be held, to be safe, to be connected, purposeful and empowered are met within the context of being 'Home' with God, living that celebratory life which Jesus describes as 'life in all its fullness'. But first we need to get there.

For some people their Christian journey begins with a Prodigal Son kind of homecoming. A life thoroughly

turned around. An experience akin to St Paul's who was persecuting Christians prior to his miraculous encounter with Jesus which turned his whole life on its head. For other people the homecoming is different – perhaps more like that of the Older Son in the story, though Jesus doesn't tell us what he decided to do in the end. The Older Son never physically left home, but he had a journey to make back towards his Father's heart. A journey that would need to overcome the obstacles of pride and jealousy and much more besides. Perhaps your Christian journey has been more like that.

But 'coming home' is not a one-time event. Every decision which turns us away from God takes us a step further away from Home. Every day we need to make the conscious choice to return.

Think about the two sons in the story. They were both born into the Father's family. They had no need to earn their place in the Home or earn His love. This loving Father lavished His affection on them from the very beginning, before they had the ability to do anything other than eat, sleep and cry. The younger son seems so secure in his place within the family and the blessings that will come to him through his Father,

that he is able to confidently demand his inheritance whilst his Father is still alive. If we had to sum up the younger son in one word we might go for 'entitled'.

Fast forward to the end of the story and we get a glimpse into the heart of the older son. We might describe him as dutiful. His acute sense of fairness comes to the fore when he berates his Father for his generosity towards the younger son.

What's interesting is that both sons have misunderstood the Father's blessing. Both believe it to be a reward and not a gift. The older son expects to be rewarded for his dutiful hard work. The son expects to be given his inheritance early because he saw it as rightfully his. Neither viewed the inheritance as a gift that the Father could choose to give them, both, for different reasons, believed it was what they deserved.

Back in the 1950's, when the first of many Billy Graham crusades in the UK helped thousands of people encounter Jesus for the first time, praise God that he did! The message proclaimed was broadly this. **You're a sinner in need of a Saviour. Jesus saves. Follow Him.** There's nothing wrong with that

message. It's true, it's Biblical.

But since the 50's there has been a gradual shift in culture, to the extent that the evidence now suggests that people are far less willing to accept that they are sinful or have fallen short. It's no longer as helpful as a starting point for evangelism. It's interesting that when the younger son 'comes to his senses' he acknowledges that he has sinned, but in the next breath he reveals his plan to return and make up for his amends. Verse 19: I am no longer worthy to be called your son, treat me like one of your hired hands.

He's basically saying, I've messed up big time, let me earn my way back into the home. Through hard work I might hope to one day experience again some of the blessings that I previously enjoyed when I was your son.

This isn't actually repentance, it's self-help. And it's mirrored in the entitled attitude of the older son who declares: I've earnt the right through my hard work to receive the blessings of the Father!

When the younger son asked for his share of the inheritance, culturally he was wishing his Father was

dead. Just before the son comes to his senses in the field of pigs, he exclaims 'I am dying of hunger!' At the end of the story the Father describes his son as 'the one who was dead'. Given that no one dies in this story, there's a lot of references to death in it!

There's a reason for that. It's because we can only receive God's forgiveness if we acknowledge our absolute inability to do anything to earn His love. We need to admit that we are so powerless when it comes to helping ourselves out of the mess of sin, that we might as well be dead. That's how ineffective any of our own efforts are.

In our age of self-help, independence, access to information and the you-can-do-anything-and-be-anything-you-want narrative, this is not an easy thing to take on board.

It has taken me a long time to learn this for myself. By nature I love to be independent, I'm prone to perfectionism and I pride myself in working hard. All of these things, which sit very deeply within my psyche, are obstacles which prevent me from throwing myself on the mercy of God.

Many of you know that in 2022, following a family bereavement, and feeling near burnout, I needed to take a few weeks away from ministry. I learnt a lot about myself during that time, and I recovered enough to return and continue. But a year later I found myself off sick again, this time for longer, and feeling altogether more desolate than I had previously. It was a very hard lesson to learn, but I believe that God was giving me a taste of what it means to be completely helpless – the crippling anxiety and despair was horrible, but it did give me a physical experience of what I needed to learn spiritually – that I can't save myself. No amount of hard work, dutiful living, success, power, relationships or anything else will save me and allow me to experience the blessing of God.

Any good thing, that God wants to give me is a gift, not something I have earned. The gift of forgiveness, which leads to eternal life with Him is given to those who have realized what it is that they actually deserve.

The younger son's plan to request to be slave in his Father's house would have stemmed from his knowledge of what would happen when he returned. He would have been expecting the villagers to enact

the dreaded ceremony of Qetsatsah **ket-sart-sah** as soon as they saw him nearing home. This was a method of punishing any Jewish boy who lost his inheritance to Gentiles. It would have involved the villagers bringing a large pot filled with burnt nuts and corn and smashing it in front of him, shouting “You are cut off from your people!” From that point on there could be no further contact with any member of the community and the returning boy would be unable to survive there. It was a punishment to be greatly feared. Almost a fate worse than death.

According to Jewish custom, banishment through the Qetsatsah **ket-sart-sah** ceremony, which would effectively ‘make dead’ the younger son is what he deserved. With this in mind the son wanted to try and work to redeem himself from this death sentence. It’s the same for us, the punishment we deserve for our sinful disobedience towards God, is death.

But our Father has other ideas.

Jesus has already given a subtle indication that the Father in this story represents God, because the Father is seen to do things that wouldn’t be permitted under Jewish law, such as sale of his land in order to give the

younger son the inheritance he was asking for. Usually this would only be permitted after the landowner's death, so Jesus is implying that the Father is 'beyond death' already.

This same Father also defies convention by eagerly watching and waiting for the son who should have been 'dead to him'. This is consistent with how we see God at work through the Old Testament – giving repeated opportunities for His 'son' – the people of Israel – to return to His loving care. So keen is the Father to welcome home His son, that He runs out to meet him – knowing He must reach him before the villagers enact the Qetsatsah **ket-sart-sah** ceremony.

Graciously side-stepping the son's self-help plea to earn his place back within the household, the Father makes it absolutely clear that the son is returning home as a son and heir. There's the ring for his finger, sandals for his feet, and the best robe for him to wear. The robe of forgiveness that covers all that is now in the past. And then He begins the preparations for a massive, lavish celebration of welcome. All the son has to do is receive, to let the immense, unconditional generosity of his Father seep into his tired, once dead, heart.

Knowing God's forgiveness, being welcomed home into the warm embrace of His love, comes through acceptance that we deserve nothing. And yet. Despite this Jesus loved us so much that He was willing to take the punishment and the shame for our own sinful state. I think we glimpse something of the scandal of the Father's actions through the anger of the older son. The Father in the parable takes the shame of the prodigal on himself and then completely transforms the situation by throwing a party.

Paul, who knew God's resurrection power in his own life, describes this beautifully in Ephesians 2. I'd encourage you to spend some time dwelling in that incredible chapter over the coming week. Here are the edited highlights (short enough to be a tweet!)

You were dead through the sins in which you once lived....But God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive together with Christ....For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast...Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

We need to be forgiven. God has provided this through the immeasurable sacrifice of Jesus. From this place of utter dependence on God's grace and mercy flows all the other things which we will explore in the coming weeks, but for now, be still and know the love of your Heavenly Father, who every day is waiting to welcome you home.