

Sermon: 9th September 2016. South Africa



[Rembrandt van Rijn](#), *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, c. [1661–1669](#). 262 cm × 205 cm. [Hermitage Museum](#), [Saint Petersburg](#)

Sermon Sunday 11TH September 2016

OLD TESTAMENT Jeremiah 4: 11 – 12, 22 – 28 OTp.639

Psalm 51

EPISTLE 1 Timothy 1: 12 – 17 NT p.193

GOSPEL St Luke 15: 1 – 10 NT p.72

The readings this morning take us on a journey from the bleak separation from God as described so powerfully in Jeremiah through to Paul's letter of encouragement to Timothy that Christ alone could mend this broken relationship. They culminate in the Good Shepherd Himself going the extra mile in Luke's Gospel to find us His lost sheep and bring us home. This sense of being found again is tenderly portrayed in Rembrandt's stunning painting of the Prodigal Son which is to be found in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg.

There is no better experience than really feeling at home again and in the Anglican liturgy this is beautifully evoked in the post Eucharistic Prayer of Thanksgiving when it says:

'When we were still far off You came to meet us in your Son and brought us home'

Feeling far off can be a painful and lonely experience. When the God we thought we knew appears no longer to be there a sense of desolation and despondency can quickly envelope us.

As I reflect on a year in the Canongate as your Assistant Minister, completing my discernment process, en route to being ordained, it is passing strange indeed how as the date of completion comes closer I often find myself far off from God. Henri Nouwen wrote a seminal book for those preparing for ordination called 'The Wounded Healer'. It's a book that I keep on coming back to and whilst initially it challenged me and disturbed me I now feel that engaging with it is like engaging with a friend, sometimes at a distance but always quietly there. It is often in our brokenness and our ability to share where we are coming from with others that we can be of the greatest support. This is perhaps especially the case when others are struggling and feeling that the God they thought they knew has in some sense become one step removed from them. It is in our brokenness that Christ often finds us and brings us home once more.

Taking our faith out of our comfort zones can often be a challenging experience; equally full of failure as success. It's a theme which I have tried to develop in my sermons here during the past year. Finding out if your faith works for you on the periphery, on the edge of what you are familiar with can, whilst being a daunting experience, also be an exhilarating one. Operating on the margins I have found initially that God is not present but in my doubting I suddenly find him breaking in again. It is as if he has caught up with me and my weird ways and has come to meet me in my fragile and broken state.

The most recent example of this came in the most unexpected place and in the most unexpected way.

During August I had the privilege of representing the Church of Scotland at the Uniting Presbyterian Church of South Africa's Probationers' Post Academic Training Conference.

I joined 15 ministers from South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia who, like me, were on the final stages of their training. Initially I felt out of my depth and was quite intimidated by the closeness within the group of these probationers who had been journeying together for several years. Yet very quickly I felt at home especially within the twice daily acts of student led worship which brought us altogether. Lifelong friendships were being hewn each day and it was a huge privilege to be part of this. The God who had come over from Scotland with me whilst initially being at a distance was suddenly very much to the fore in our shared fellowship.

For two weeks we were based in the Simonsberg Christian Centre at the foot of the Stellenbosch Mountains. This beautiful part of the Western Cape is dominated by vineyards and verdant pastures and wildlife. The Conference theme was exploring the fruits of God's Kingdom with a particular emphasis on pruning the vines to ensure continued growth.

Probationers led daily morning and evening worship which was assessed by representatives of the UPCSA Ministries Council and by peer feedback. Study topics were introduced and reflected upon at the Centre whilst we went out on workshops throughout the city of Cape Town and its surrounding areas. These visits gave us an amazing insight into the diverse work of the UPCSA particularly in the former Townships.

Then just as quickly as I was starting to feel in my comfort zone and in control I was taken out of it again.

In the middle Sunday we were all due to be guests and hosted by congregations throughout Cape Town. We were to go out in pairs and there was no expectation that we would lead the worship in any way apart from being introduced and welcomed during the Service. In fact it sounded like a rather Jesuirely day in comparison to the very full -on programme to date.

I knew things were not going to be that straightforward when we were told that one of us would have to go out alone as we were an odd number. Somehow I knew it was going to be me! Then whilst others were going to go to quite affluent parts of Cape Town I was told that I was off to Ndbongo Memorial Church Nyanga. We had passed Nyanga Township nearly every day but never gone in because it was the most dangerous place in Cape Town with the highest crime/carjacking rate etc . I suddenly realized that the relaxing day I thought I had earned was not going to materialise.

I was to be collected by Mfundisi (Minister) Vuyo from the centre of Cape Town and then driven into Nyanga. The journey in reminded me of my days on operations as a Platoon Commander in the Black Watch in Northern Ireland when we would move from our secure barracks out into a troubled area.

Vuyo took me to visit two of his outstation tin shack churches before we headed to his main place of worship. Suddenly at a robot (the name for a South African traffic light) he turned to me and said 'Peter my good friend have you brought your Sermon?' This caught me totally unawares as we had been told that as a guest we would not be taking part in leading the worship. I had nothing prepared and nothing with me. But looking over to Vuyo and taking in my surroundings in the Township I felt I had to say yes.

'That's great I will lend you my preaching gown when we get there. By the way we are about 20 minutes late and the Service will have started by now.'

Suddenly I felt I had to switch on and start working and thinking hard and I wondered if God would be supporting me for the rest of the morning as I really needed Him now more than ever.

My anxiety levels only increased when we entered the church. If you play the following you tube link and turn up the volume this is what I walked into:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pDXGE3ZgKg&sns=em>

I had never felt so lost in my life. The noise was thunderous, the language was new to me and totally beyond my comprehension, and I was the only white face amongst 350 worshippers and everyone was on their feet dancing and blowing whistles! I had no idea what was going to happen next.

As the Elders led the worship my phone vibrated and I reached for it. Vuyo who was sitting next to me had sent me a text as it was too loud to hold a conversation.

It read 'send me two reading please'. I did still not knowing when I was to preach in the Service. About 40 minutes later he texted again ' you are on in 5 minutes and a Sermon always go over 35 mins - it is so good to have you with us Peter'.

Well the next 35 mins were life changing for me. I just had to go for it and seeing what amazing dancers they were I told them about a dance special to me. A dance that included the themes of. welcome (baptism) support on the cross (pastoral care) and all going round together (inclusion) Having set the theological theme and a threefold check list as to how welcoming , how caring and how inclusive is your Church I then invited 7 people to come and join me as we danced the Reel of the 51st Highland Division in front of the whole congregation. The dancing beat was provided by young men pounding leather seat cushion and young children clanging tin cans.

As Leading couple my partner (the choir leader) and I got to the point when you balance in the middle of the cross I looked into her eyes and realised Christ had found me and we were symbolically balancing on the cross together. By reaching out to my fellow worshippers into the unknown I had been found by Christ and it was the most invigorating and wonderful spiritual experience. Never Before have I felt so at home in the family of God.

To Whose name be all the praise and all the glory.

Amen

(Interestingly when I was preaching in Nyanga that day it was the first time I had ever worn a clerical collar and it felt good)

(Also culturally I had stumbled around a bit, feeling pretty lost trying to get to grips with a threefold handshake that people use in South Africa. It starts with the common handshake I am familiar with, then seamlessly the hand creates a grip with thumbs locking, just as quickly to return to the common handshake we know so well. It's a beautiful way to share the Peace of Christ and the first time I got it right was during the Reel griping my partners hand as we balanced together on the cross supported and held up by the hand grips of those at either side).

