This morning we’re going to reflect on the good news about sin. Yes, good news! It’s this. That no matter how great
the real or imagined impact sin has or will have on our lives, it can never be too enormous a pile of dust and dirt for
God’s hoover to be able to cope with! Because the kind of God he is is the God we see pictured in the parable of the
prodigal son.

I have a version of this parable which I thought you might enjoy. I briefly contemplated asking Donald to read it
earlier. But it isn’t an authorised translation of the Scriptures and so wiser counsels prevailed. It’s called the ‘Fable of
the Forgiving Father’...

Feeling foot-loose and frisky, a feather-brained and feckless fellow forced his fond father to fork over the farthings.
He flew far to foreign fields and flamboyantly frittered his fortune feasting fabulously with faithless friends. Finally,
forsaken by his foolish fellows and facing fearful famine, he found himself flinging feed in a filthy farmyard. Feebly
fainting and fairly famished, he fain would have filled his frame with foraged food from the fragments of foul fodder.
“Fooey, my father’s flunkies fare far fancier,” the crazed fugitive fumed, frankly facing facts. He flew forthwith to
his father’s farm and, falling at his feet, he floundered forlornly, “Father, I have flunked and fruitlessly forfeited
family favour.” Forestalling further flinching, the forgiving father frantically flagged the flunkies to fetch forth the
finest fatling and fix a feast. The fugitive’s fault-finding fraternal foe frowned on such fickle forgiveness of failure. His
fury flashed ferociously, but fussing was futile, for the faithful father figured, “Such filial fidelity is fine, but what
forbids fervent festivity with fanfares flaring? Let fun and frolic freely flow, for former foolishness is forgotten and
folly forsaken. Forgiveness forms the firm foundation for future fortitude and felicity!”

Here’s someone who has had enough of home. Someone who resents having to live with his family and fit in with his
father’s wishes. Someone who wants to strike out on his own instead. Now we might want to sympathize with him.
We might want to applaud a young man who is showing signs of growing up. But we need to understand that, in the
culture of the time, what he did was almost unthinkable. His decision to leave home isn’t an act of maturity, but an
act of rebellion.

What he does is a very simple and precise picture of what sin really is. It’s not so much the bad things we do (sins)
but the basic attitude that lies behind them (sin). It’s wanting to do without God. It’s about wishing he wasn’t in
the picture. It’s about living as though he doesn’t exist. Just like this younger son who wishes, in effect, that his father is
dead so that his wealth can be divided out.

So what happens? The story goes on to press home the point that this is all very well but, unfortunately and
inevitably, sin has results that are, first, serious and secondly, quite unforeseen. It all goes wrong. His resources run
out and he ends up having to do the most degrading job imaginable: feeding pigs. Now we might quite fancy the idea
of feeding pigs, but just remember: this is a story being told to first century Jews. What Jesus says here is calculated
to make them feel quite ill. Yuk! Just think of what to you is the worst job imaginable and put that in its pla
ce! Not only that, he is also subject to the most degrading circumstances: longing to feed himself with what the pigs were
eating. Imagine that – coming down to breakfast and only being able to eat the contents of the compost bin!

This younger son had thought that if he could just get away from his father then he would have the sort of life he
wanted. But he discovers that he has been deceived. He learns that this is not how he was made to be after all. He
learns, all too painfully, that sin tells lies.

Do your own thing! Don’t bother about God! Live life the way you want! That’s the way to be happy! These are the
claims that sin boldly foists upon us. But they’re not true.

Which is just how this son is described in verse 24. When he returns home this is what the father says: ‘...for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’

And that’s right. For if it is true that God is the source of all that is life, then to reject him is to reject life and leave ourselves with the only alternative. As the apostle Paul puts it very starkly in Romans 6.23: ‘...the wages of sin is death...’

Sin tells lies. It deceives us into believing that we’re better off when we leave God on the sidelines. But the thing is that it doesn’t just tell lies about itself. It also tells lies about God.

Look again at verses 17-20. ‘...when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”” So he set off and went to his father.’

Notice the terrible thing that sin has done here. It has distorted the son’s image of what his father is like. It has led him to think that the only way his father will accept him back again is if he agrees to go back, not as a son, but as one of the hired servants.

Which is not unlike what many people think that following Jesus as is all about. Sin leads us to believe that linking up with God again will lead to a life of total misery. That God’s main ambition is to interfere, to spoil our lives and make them as unhappy as he can. That he takes some sort of grim pleasure in making our lives as dull as possible.

That’s why the next part of the story is so important. Because it shows what God is really like. Verses 20-24: ‘...he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.

The good news is that the father who, in sadness, watched his son go away is the father who remains on the lookout for him to return. Filled with a compassion that swallows up the shame and disgrace that this son has brought on the family. Look again at the welcome he receives. A hug. Kisses. A chance to say sorry. The best robe. A ring. New shoes. A party to end all parties to celebrate his homecoming.

This is what God is like. Eager to receive us back. Willing to put himself out. Happy to forget the past. Wanting to start again.

So it’s a good story with a happy ending. But how can it be true? How can God really be as loving and forgiving as this? Surely this can’t be what life is really like. The whole thing is mere wishful thinking.

Well, of course, it would be mere wishful thinking were it not for the one telling the story: Jesus Christ. This is Jesus himself speaking. And all the evidence points to the fact that he knows what he is talking about. For this is what Jesus, the Son of God, shows him to be like.

His life overflows with the reality of a God who is full of love and compassion to those who do not deserve it. His death on the Cross is the means by which, yes, God really does forgive those who turn back to him: ‘For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.’ And his resurrection from the dead is God’s stamp of approval, his demonstration that what Jesus said and did really is true. The whole of Jesus’ life and ministry shouts out to us: ‘Come home: all is forgiven!’

Our response to this will take one of three forms.
1. ‘Come home, all is forgiven!’ ‘No, I don’t really want to. I’m happy enough as I am’. To you I say thank you for listening. If you ever change your mind, you know where to come.

2. ‘Come home, all is forgiven!’ ‘I’d like to, but I’m not quite sure about it all.’ To you I say ‘get sure’. Set yourself to discover more. Read through a Gospel, together with one of the many books available on the evidence that the Christian message is true.

3. ‘Come home, all is forgiven!’ Yes, I will. I don’t know all the answers but I know enough. I want to leave the pigs and come home to where I belong. If that’s you, I invite you to do two things. Join me in this prayer now and link up with a Christian friend or minister (or maybe someone who is both!) to find out more.

Father, thank you for your love, your patience, your compassion. Father, like the prodigal son, I have sinned. I’m not worthy to be called your child. But thank you for all that Jesus has done to open wide the way for me to come home. Please take me back as you have promised, and help me to love and serve you faithfully for the rest of my life. Amen.