

# 1. RETURNING

## Stepping out again

*Luke 15:11-24*

### Time to take stock

The coronavirus. It seemed to appear out of the blue and quickly forced the world into shutdown. It sent many aspects of life, that we had taken for granted, into meltdown. Church life as we know it went into lockdown. It may well be the most cataclysmic event any of us will ever live through. The full impact and after effects are not yet fully calculated, but the time for life to return to a new normality has arrived as we gradually gather ourselves together again.

As we find ourselves returning to recommence the daily routines of our everyday lives and church life once again, what does that feel like? What might we see with fresh eyes? What have we learned? What might we decide to do differently, do with greater vigour, not do at all?

### – TO TALK ABOUT –

**Q. What words would you use to describe how you are feeling about life beginning to return to more familiar patterns as the restrictions resulting from the coronavirus pandemic begin to be relaxed?**

Returning is a frequent theme in the Bible. It is always a significant event, whether for individuals or the people of God as a whole.

- Jacob returns home and on the journey wrestles with God at Peniel and is changed forever (Genesis 32).
- The people of God return from exile in Babylon with joy, having found that he was still with them when the familiar trappings of temple and well-worn practices of worship had been stripped away (Psalm 126).
- The prodigal son in Jesus' story returns to the fold and in the process comes to a whole new understanding of who he is as he experiences again his father's love (Luke 15).

Returning is a core part of our Christian journey as well. We are called to a life of repentance, re-turning from our own ways to God and his ways for our lives. It marks a change of mind, heart and living.

**Let's have a look at the familiar story of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-24 and reflect on how it might help us take stock of our lives as we step out again as followers of Jesus into the new reality of living with the coronavirus pandemic.**

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## PARALLELS AND

## PATTERNS

*Read Luke 15:11-24.*

Do so slowly. Listen carefully. Pay attention to the details. Reflect on how things feel at different parts of the story. Let the story sink into your soul.

### – TO TALK ABOUT –

#### PARALLELS

Line up the story alongside your recent experience of living through the coronavirus pandemic. Use the questions below to help identify and talk about some parallels.

The younger son in the story was discontented with life in his father's house (v12).

**Q. How has the coronavirus exposed some of our previous discontent with a life in which we had so much for which to be thankful?**

The son who strayed in the story soon found that doing what he had always wanted - spending his time, money and life on pleasures – didn't satisfy and ended up leaving him desperately needy and lonely (vv13-16).

**Q. How might this be similar to the discovery that having more time to ourselves and greater dependency on digital communication turned out to be a mixed blessing at best?**

Talk about other parallels you can see between the story and our situation today.

#### PATTERNS

Line up the story alongside your recent experience of living through the coronavirus pandemic. Use the questions below to help identify and talk about some patterns for living as followers of Jesus.

The distant son is prompted to reassess his life and come to his senses by his experience of difficult circumstances (v17).

**Q. What patterns of life have the upheavals of the period of pandemic prompted you to reassess?**

The returning son is overwhelmed and encouraged by his father's welcome, forgiveness and joy at his return (vv21-24). He knows him in a new way and has learned a lot about himself.

**Q. How do we know God in a new way as we experience his love afresh as individuals or a congregation having lived through the period of pandemic? What have we learned about ourselves as individuals, or a congregation, as we return to church life together again? What needs to be confessed? In what new discoveries can we take confidence?**

Talk about other patterns of who God is and how he acts, or lessons that we can learn in living as his followers and his church, that emerge from this story.



## POSSIBILITIES AND

## PERSPECTIVES

### – TO TALK ABOUT –

#### POSSIBILITIES

Take a moment to think about the initial impression this story made upon you as you read it and the discussion that you have just had. What sticks in your mind? What do you particularly sense God prompting you to think more deeply about?

Pause and take a moment on your own, or share with the person next to you, your sense of what God is saying to you or your congregation from your reflections on this story?

#### PERSPECTIVES

Prepare to share with others what impression God has made upon your heart. Do your best to put this into words. Maybe it will be the same as others, maybe it will be different. Pay attention to the conversation that is about to start so that God can deepen and widen the impact of his Word.

Share with the whole group the lessons you think God is teaching you and your congregation through his Word, by his Spirit.

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## PATHWAYS

## TO PURSUE

### – TO TALK AND PRAY ABOUT –

#### *Thinking*

What has reading this story against the background of your experience of the period of coronavirus pandemic caused you to think again about?

#### *Living*

In what specific ways will that make you change the way you live as a follower of Jesus? How might it reshape an aspect of your congregation's life?

#### *Praying*

Pray together for strength to follow through on what God has taught each person and the implications for your life together as a congregation.

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## PROMISE AND

## PRAYER

#### PROMISE

*Those the Lord has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.* Isaiah 51:11

#### PRAYER

Father God,  
who loves to gather your children to yourself;  
at this time of return to everyday life  
and recommencement of the regular rhythms of church life,  
help us to acknowledge your rescuing hand:  
to know joy in our hearts,  
to feel sorrow and sadness subside,  
to better know your love, ourselves and your ways for us.  
In Jesus' name.  
Amen.