

Comfortably Numb....?

STANDING OUTSIDE

It is possibly the hardest thing I've ever had to do. Actually the truth is, I'm not sure I've really come to terms with it yet. I certainly hope that I'm now some way along the road, but I am aware that there is still a long way to go and the frightening thing is – I am the one who is completely in charge of the rest of the story. The trouble is the more I seem to travel down this road, the more I seem to wrestle with the challenges.

As many of you know, I grew up in church and there's never been a time when I wasn't in church. By the time I was born, my dad was the curate of St. Catherine's church in Norwich. Only recently I learnt that he was ordained in Norwich Cathedral. As the song says – I'm the son of a preacher man! Even after his sudden death, I never stopped going to church. Actually as I look back, I realise there was always something burning in me about church. Perhaps that's why I'm standing here today!

I always understood how I was supposed to live; I understood that the life of faith, the life of a follower of Christ meant a certain way of living; I understood that it was about loving your enemies – and in my own childish kind of way I tried desperately to live that out.

I would always be paired with the kid no-one else wanted to work with. I would even volunteer to do that – because I know that was a loving thing to do. I never wanted to be in any kind of trouble. I was well behaved at school – my school reports were full of comments like “he is a delight to teach!” I would lose sleep if I ever thought I was going to get into trouble.

I would never cheat. I found it really hard to tell lies (although as a kid I did – usually to try and get my brother or sister into trouble) but outside of the family

you could bank on me to tell the truth, even to the point where I disallowed a try for my own school rugby team because our player put his foot in touch. The referee didn't know if his foot had touched the line – but I did – so I flagged. My team mates were not impressed.

I always wanted to do the right thing – and I did. I would only do things that were approved of by school, church or family. I was always acutely aware that there may be things I could get away with with people – but God would know, and I didn't want to fall out with God!

I've always tried to live a life of integrity and as I grew up I had to figure out what that meant. I was never attracted to smoking, I hardly ever drank much and even if I did I never got anywhere near being drunk. In fact when I was in university I got asked to drive the minibus of students home from the University Soccer Cup final we'd been watching – because I was the only one who could be relied on not to drink too much during the day!

I went out with a girl while at University who wasn't a Christian. I discovered later that her friends had a bet on with each other as to how long it would take her to get me into bed.... they lost! I've always played by the rules, lived how I knew I was supposed to. I have on occasions felt like 'phoning in to radio discussion to tell them what this country needs actually is more people like me.... Good people who don't cheat or lie, or try to get something for nothing, or claim falsely on their insurance etc... And if I'm honest I can begin to feel a little bit of resentment build in me, and I find myself thinking – how come its ok for some people to do all the things you're not supposed to do? A little further down the road I find myself thinking – how come the people who get the biggest platforms to give their testimony are the people who fouled up the most? It's not far from there to thinking – what about people like me who've only ever been faithful and honest and reliable and persevered? Just when I am filled with self- righteous pomp.... I read this:

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard the music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has

killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ The older brother became angry and refused to go in. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ (Luke 15 v 25-30)

I am shocked – sick to my stomach – because that’s me – the elder son..... That’s me. This story is in truth, the story of two prodigals. One is the son who went away and then came back, the other is the son who never left. And it is a shocking truth that the elder son, the other prodigal is me! And... maybe you too?!

By this time in the story the Pharisees listening knew exactly who the elder son was. Sadly, the elder son himself may never have realised that he too, was a prodigal. He may not have left home, but he has certainly distanced himself from his father. The manner of their leaving may have been different, but both had left: both sons are “outside” at different points in the story; both sons try to act like servants! One wants to work as a slave, the other is a slave to his heart. Both wanted payment – one his inheritance, the other a private party for him and his friends. Both wanted something from the father to serve his own interests, both insult their father. Both attempt manipulation and both move away from the father, the community and friends.

To both the father shows his immense, patient and all encompassing love. Both sons are prodigals. Some are like the younger son who leaves obviously and whose homecoming is cause for celebration. Some are like the older son where the leaving is less obvious and often invisible – but it eats at the heart and destroys from within.

Henri Nouwen writes this; “The lostness of the elder son, however, is much harder to identify. After all, he did all the right things. He was obedient, dutiful, law-abiding and hard working. People respected him, admired him, praised him and likely considered him a model son. Outwardly, the elder son was faultless.

But when confronted with his father's joy at the return of his younger brother, a dark power erupts in him and boils to the surface. Suddenly, there becomes glaringly visible a resentful, proud, unkind, selfish person, one that had remained deeply hidden, even though it had been growing stronger and more powerful over the years."¹

Friends, when we look into ourselves, which does more damage: lust or resentment? Perhaps a challenge for people like me is that I am so concerned about avoiding "sin" that I become judgemental, condemning and prejudice towards others. And there is always the possibility that years of trying to be good, acceptable, likeable and a worthy example to others have actually made it very hard for me to live well in my father's house.

Friends, I for one have known deep, deep in my heart the feeling of envy towards others. I have found myself asking the question: so what's the point of staying at home? I have played judge; I have condemned; I have resented; I have watched and in my heart despaired. I have found myself saying, "I have tried so hard – but look at them!" The temptations all disciples wrestle with go beyond the obvious avoidance of "sin". What awaits is slavery! Where there is slavery there is no joy!

Perhaps some of it comes from false ideas and understandings of what God is really like. We can never enjoy God's presence because we are so convinced we'll never quite match up! God doesn't want slaves, he wants sons and daughters! The welcome received by the younger son was too much for big brother, and in fact, his resentment has built to such a pitch that his insult of his father is arguably greater than his younger brother's. He maligns his father and blames him for his condition. Near Eastern commentators note that he refuses to greet his father in the accepted way – he just launches into his tirade. He blatantly disobeys his father by refusing to join in the banquet. His very public outburst would have been considered a heinous crime in his culture.

Friends, how many of us have become resentful? The level of self-deception is quite astonishing in one way and quite frightening in another. How many of us harbour resentment because God hasn't played ball: the partner I so longed for; the one I got who's let me down; the house I can't afford; the job that's just out

of reach; the family I never experienced; the body that's not working properly; the gifts I desired but were given to others; the intellect I wish I had; the choices made by others that have so changed my life; the people I trusted who let me down; the things I prayed for but never happened; the things I prayed that wouldn't happen that did; the healing that's never come; the transformation in others that I have yet to see; those who are more successful than me; those who are doing the things that I would really like to do....

And yet the older brother says: "I never disobeyed your orders." Truth is, he's in rebellion even as he speaks! How about you? Is there rebellion somewhere deep in your heart? Are you comfortably numb in your heart?

For the second time that day the father goes searching for his son – this time his older one. Big brother was standing outside with no intention of coming in! Interestingly the word searching used here is the same word used to describe the action of the shepherd and the widow in the two stories Jesus told before this one!

He longs that his elder son will come home just as much as he ever longed for his younger son to come home. And friends, that's true today. He loves you because he loves you because he loves you..... and there is nothing you can do to earn that love...not even living the life of a saint! We don't know if the elder son remained outside... this story is for us to finish. So.... how about you.... staying outside.... or coming home?

You won't be able to do it yourself... allow yourself to be found again by the Father's love, wrapped in his grace. He loves you because he loves you because he loves you.... Now – it's up to you to write the ending!!!

1. Nouwen, Henri: *"The return of the Prodigal Son"*, DLT 1994 pg. 71