

A MEDITATION ON THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON

Reading: Luke 15: 11-24 (but I was also thinking about Rembrandt's painting of the same scene).

I let you go because I loved you. I could have tried to stop you, especially since I thought you would make a mess of things and be unhappy. But you wanted your freedom, you said; you wanted to go out and prove yourself. You didn't want my arms round you: you found that suffocating, smothering. So you left home. I suppose I could have tried to keep you here by refusing to give you your inheritance, but that would have been underhand, wouldn't it.

You were all excited with your freedom, with going off, with new experiences, new people. I was left, empty with your loss, to cope with the rejection; long days just waiting, hoping; trying to let go of the resentment your going brought out in me. Waiting.....

I know what you got up to, all the young man's things, all those things to show you were cool, to make you popular, the restless partying, the glitz. Home, and life with me must have seemed so dull in comparison. I waited for you. And that was a struggle: to know what was going on and not to interfere, to know you were going wrong and were unhappy, and to let you carry on; and to cope with my pain each day, seeing your room empty, praying for you.

I knew things would go pear-shaped; you had to learn that that sort of freedom wasn't all that you'd hoped. I tried not to gloat as you began to suffer, and it was hard for me to know things were going wrong for you and to have to stand back and watch. I wanted you to come home, not for my sake and to ease my pain, but for your sake, for you to come home willingly, eagerly. Yes, with your tail between your legs perhaps for a little, but wiser and able now to accept my love. I have always loved you. Even when you turned your back on me and hurt me so much, I have always loved you.

And now that you have come back home to me, I can't say, "I told you so." We know, you and I, that you felt you had to go in the first place, you had - perhaps - to make these mistakes in order to learn from them. And I know the courage it took to admit your mistakes when so many people won't. It took great courage to turn back and to come home. You can't see the joy on my face: and I don't want to show that too openly anyway, when I can feel your pain through my hands round your shoulders. Joy will come for us both - later.

I have plans for you, but we'll discuss those together in due course. Our relationship will be a little fragile at first; after all, it needs to be different from before; you have grown up, and we've both suffered. But now it's time for a party, with all the treats I know you love.

You are my son, my child, whom I love. Welcome, welcome home!

Chris van Straaten