

M. BASIL PENNINGTON, O.C.S.O.

THE WAY BACK HOME



AN INTRODUCTION TO
CENTERING PRAYER

PENNINGTON

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Paulist Press

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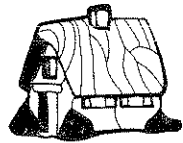
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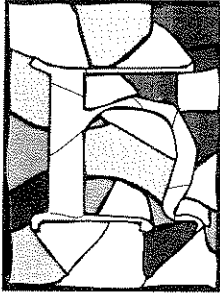
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Lord, Where are You?





ISTORY repeats itself. We've all heard that. We ask the same questions others have asked before us. We seek the same things others have sought before us:

a meaning for our lives,
friends,
and some kind of relationship with God that
grounds all the rest.

We look for a wise person who has some answers and who shows by the peace in his eyes and the serene joy in his face that these are answers that work.

In recent years a lot of men and women have headed east in search of those answers. They have gone off to India, Thailand and even more exotic places. Sometimes they have found something, but most have returned home to their own roots.

This isn't the first time men and women have gone east. Remember Marco Polo, Mateo Ricci and Francis Xavier? In the middle ages there were crusaders and pilgrims. Earlier there were other seekers. My patron Basil and his friend Gregory left the lecture halls of Athens in the fourth century to find a truer, deeper wisdom. John Cassian, the wealthy young man from Dalmatia, went the same way. And women, too: Paula and that delightful pair, Malenia the Elder

and Malenia the Younger, a grandmother and granddaughter.

Back in Jesus' time they did it, too. What were the two young fishermen from the shores of Lake Galilee doing east of the Jordan? They were seeking a strange man who had emerged from the desert. He had long hair and a long beard; he wore a camel's pelt, and it was said he ate only wild honey and chewed on grasshoppers! But he had a message. And people were flocking to him. John and Andrew went, too. "Are you the one?" they asked—the one who has the answers, the one we all hope for.

This man from the desert, John the Baptizer, was a humble man. "No, I am not he. But wait, prepare. He is coming."

John and Andrew did wait. Then suddenly one day, as the Baptizer was preaching, he lifted up his eyes and saw him. "Look! Look there! There he is." John and Andrew took off. As they ran up behind Jesus, the master turned. And he asked them what he asks each one of us—these are the first recorded words of Jesus to his disciples—"What do you want? What are you looking for?"

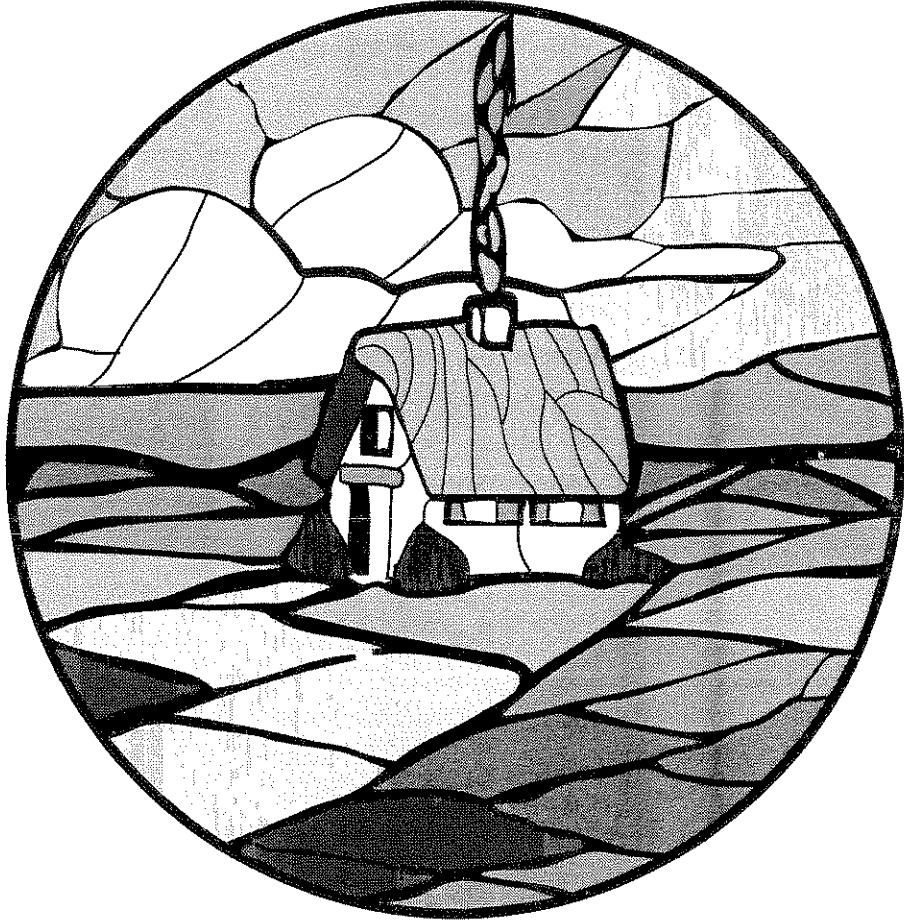
What is our answer?

John was a smart young man. He wanted it all. "Master, where do you dwell?" He didn't want any particular little thing. He wanted to move right in with the Lord.

Jesus replied, "Come and see."

And they followed Jesus.

Probably John and Andrew fully expected Jesus



to lead them to some house or small hut where they could stay with him to learn all the secrets of true happiness and divine wisdom. But soon enough they learned that while the foxes have their dens and the birds their nests, the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head.

John followed Jesus faithfully for three years. He listened to his every word. He came to know that he was the disciple Jesus loved—just as each of us will discover if we spend some time with Jesus.

Finally a momentous night came. At first John did not know its full import, but at Jesus' command he and Andrew's brother, Simon Peter, prepared a special meal. At that meal Jesus opened his heart to John and the others in a way he never had before. And as he did, he finally answered John's first question.

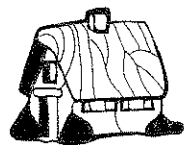
"He who loves me, the Father and I will come and we will dwell in him." Where do I dwell, John? I dwell in you.

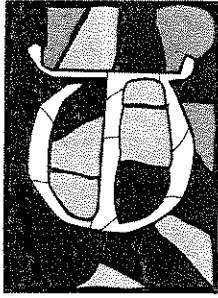
This is God's favorite dwelling place on earth: in you and in me.

God is everywhere, of course, but where does he *dwell*? The word "dwell" which John and Jesus used has a special meaning. It doesn't just mean being there or living there, but being there with all the intimacy of loved ones or family. God dwells in us. He wants to share life intimately with us. That is the reason for the whole creation. "All things are yours, and you are Christ's and Christ is God's."

God dwells with us. He is always at home within us. But, alas, most of the time *we are not home*.

The True Self





WHEN we were born—of course, most of us don't remember it for ourselves, though it is all written deep in our memories—we experienced ourselves as little bundles of need. We needed warmth, we needed stroking, we needed nurture. All these *things* were very important to us. And we yowled to get them.

And most of us got them.

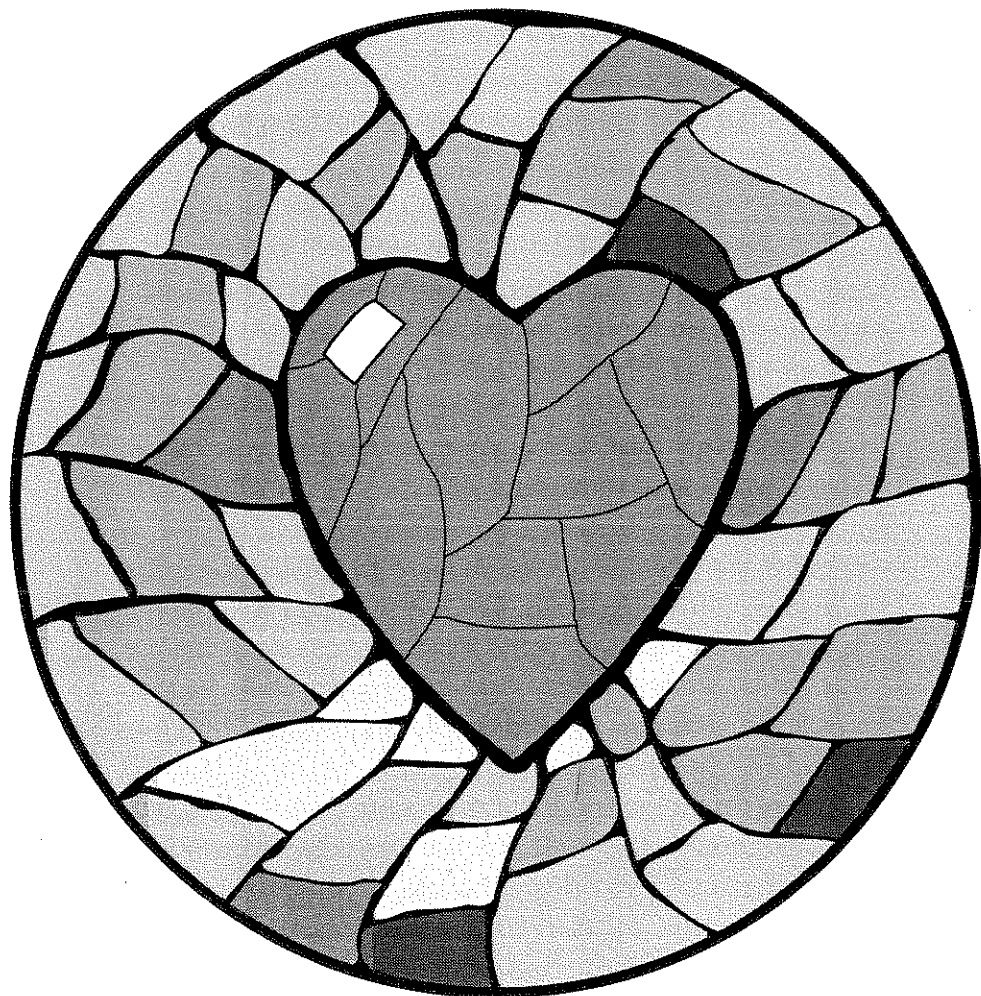
Our consciousness expanded. The *persons* who supplied these needs became very important to us. There was a deep bonding.

As we grew and our consciousness continued to expand, we became aware of how important were the things we did, our *doings*. We learned that if we acted in a certain way, people would give us what we wanted. If we kept certain people happy with the way we acted, rewards would be forthcoming. And we would be the envy of others.

Gradually out of all of this came a sense of self—unfortunately a false self. We saw ourselves as what we had, what we could do, what others thought of us.

That's how most of us still see ourselves, most of the time.

Have you ever noticed how often, when a man introduces himself, he immediately tells you what he does. And when he doesn't, how quickly do you ask him that question: What do you do? That's why it is



so difficult for many men to retire: they have so identified themselves with what they do that to no longer do it is like losing a big part of themselves.

In the past, women didn't do this so much. They weren't thought to do anything significant, being just housewives and mothers. (What a strange sense of values we sometimes have!) They often identified with what they had: their clothes, their jewelry, their bodies. But it was the same false sense of self showing up.

Times have changed, of course. Today, Mrs. Jones is apt to be president of the company while Mr. Jones may be wearing his gold bracelet, neck chain and even earrings.

It is a very fragile self, this false self made up of what we have, what we do and what other people think of us. We can so easily lose things, lose our ability to perform, lose our hold on others. We tend to be very defensive.

We tend to be competitive. After all, the more he gets, the less I get. The more they like her, the less they are going to like me and take care of me.

This false sense of self leads to frustration and even to violence. If I sense that I must always do what others want, that I must please them to get what I want, deep down I resent it. I even hate them. Of course, I can't admit that, even to myself. I have to keep pleasing them to keep getting what I want and need. So I repress my resentment and hatred and live with a terrible frustration. And then one day that repressed hatred suddenly erupts . . .

Our false sense of self flows over into our experience of God. For many people God is just the big one out there somewhere, the giver of the real goodies that last forever. We have to satisfy him, or else. This is their sense of religion: satisfying God to get what they want—and resenting God for making such demands on them.

But all of this is not the reality. It is not who we really are. It is not the way things really are.

God is not somebody out there who is going to give us eternal goodies. He is a loving friend who dwells within us, wanting us to dwell with him so that he can teach us all things and, above all, tell us of his love.

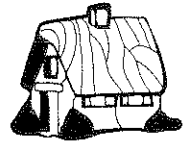
We want to come to our true selves, that self who dwells in God's creative love. At our center we are not empty, needy little things. At our center we are full, very full—full of God with all his creative love.

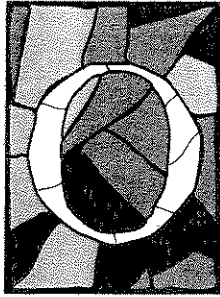
We don't have to care about what other people think of us. God thinks the world of us—he made the world just for us. "All things are yours, and you are Christ's and Christ is God's." We can do whatever we want: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me." We can have whatever we want: "Ask and you shall receive."

We want to come home to our true selves. We want to discover not only how rich and powerful and beautiful we are—discover how much we are loved, because God does dwell with us as a most loving friend and teacher and Lord.

But how do we come home?

Coming Home





NE of the young men who headed east in the course of the fifth century was a wealthy young man from Dalmatia who had gone to Rome to study—John Cassian by name. John traveled widely in what we call today Asia Minor and Syria, and finally he settled in a monastery near Bethlehem. But he was far from satisfied. With the blessing of his spiritual father, he set out again on a seven-year quest only to return to his monastery still filled with longing. His third journey took him into the depths of the Egyptian desert where he sought out the fabled fathers of the desert. There he came upon a wise old man who was said to be the holiest, oldest and wisest of the fathers: Abba Isaac.

John and his traveling companion Little Herman approached the venerable father with their deepest need. “Father, give us a word on prayer.” The venerable abba spoke to them beautifully of communion with the God who so loves us and dwells within us. He spoke of the fruits and the joy to be found in a life that is grounded on the inner experience of God.

John and his friend all but floated back to the guest cell that night. But when they awoke in the morning their feet were again well planted on the earth. Little Herman turned to John: “Yes, but how do you do it?” How does one enter into the experi-

ence of the living God who lives within us and grounds our life upon the reality of the true self?

The two young men picked up their tunics and ran back across the sands to the cell of Abba Isaac. "How do you do it? How do you enter into this kind of prayer?"

The father was impressed by the sincerity of his two inquirers. "I see that you are true seekers. Then let me tell you what I learned as a young man from one of the holiest, oldest and wisest fathers." Thus began Abba Isaac's second conference and the practical teaching on how to enter into the space of the true self and come into the presence of the living God who lives within.

John did not return to his Bethlehem monastery. He went instead to the capital of his world, Constantinople. There he was ordained a priest and set forth to bring to the west the wisdom he had found in the east. John founded two monasteries near the city of Marseilles, one for men and one for women. For these monks and nuns he wrote down as best he could remember the words of life he had received from the great spiritual masters of the east. It is here we find the second conference of Abba Isaac with its practical instruction on Christian meditation, the method we call today "Centering Prayer."

Through the ages monks and nuns read the conferences of Abba Isaac as recorded by John Cassian. They practiced the prayer. And they taught others the prayer. Spiritual fathers in the monasteries and lay



brothers out on the granges and at the fairs taught the prayer. The fathers wrote treatises on it for their spiritual sons and daughters. The best known of these, by far, is one written in the fourteenth century, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It is still widely used in our times, available in several editions.

In 1971 there was an important gathering of spiritual fathers in Rome. These were the Cistercian abbots, the leaders of monasteries from all parts of the world. They had come to reflect together on how they could better serve their sons and daughters. They gathered around the Holy Father, Pope Paul VI. The aging pontiff had one message for them. While remaining faithful to their own monastic way, he urged them to do all they could to help all the sons and daughters of the church, all the pilgrim people of God, to rediscover this ancient way of prayer, to discover their true selves centered in God so that they could ground their lives in truth—the really real—and in love and in the power of God. That is where fullness and fulfillment lie for us all.

The Cistercians sought a simple practical way of sharing this prayer. Soon they were teaching it widely. Inspired by one of the greatest spiritual masters among them, Father Louis (Thomas Merton) the prayer began to be called Centering Prayer—a new name for a very old reality.

Here then, in its modern form, is the ancient method of Christian meditation that Abba Isaac taught John Cassian and which the Cistercian (Trappist) spiritual fathers teach today:

CENTERING PRAYER

†† Sit relaxed and quiet.

1. Be in faith and love to God,
who dwells in the center of your being.
2. Take up a love word and let it be gently present,
supporting your being to God in faith-filled love.
3. Whenever you become aware of anything else,
simply, gently return to the Lord
with the use of your prayer word.

†† At the end of your prayer time let the Our Father
(or some other prayer) pray itself within you.

Sit relaxed and quiet.

Our friends have brought back some wonderful postures from the east such as the lotus and half lotus. They are good ways to sit for meditation. But for most of us simply sitting in a chair, one that gives our back good support, is probably best. The important thing is that we are relaxed (but not too relaxed or we will soon be snoring) and that our back is straight so that the vitalizing energies can flow easily. It is good to close our eyes. We use a good bit of psychic energy in seeing. As soon as we close our eyes we begin to quiet down.

Jesus has said to us: "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will refresh you." Prayer should be refreshing—physically as well as spiritually and psychically.



*Be in faith and love to God
who dwells in the center of your being.*

We know that the Lord dwells in us. We know that by faith: because he said it, it is so.

In love we give ourselves to him, our whole attention, all that we are, for the twenty minutes of our prayer. "I am all yours, Lord. Do with me whatever you will."

*Take up a love word and let it be gently present,
supporting your being to God in faith-filled love.*

We choose a word of love, usually our favorite name for the Lord: "Jesus," "Lord," "Friend." (Probably Jesus' love word was "Abba.") We gently say this word deep within, and let it quietly repeat itself. No effort. Just let it be there—to keep us there with the Lord—open to him, letting him be present to us in any way he wants.

*Whenever you become aware of anything else,
simply, gently return to the Lord
with the use of your prayer word.*

We settle down with the Lord. It is wonderful, very peaceful. Then all of sudden we realize we are

thinking about what we had for supper last night, or something we forgot to do, or our plans for next summer, or, or, or . . . The interior computer keeps going. Also there are the things from outside: we hear voices from the next room, somebody is mowing a lawn or playing the piano down the hall, etc.

Each time we become *aware* of something, we use our love word to return gently to the Lord. Some days we will have to use that word almost constantly. There is a lot going on inside—or outside. Other days we will not need it much at all. It doesn't really matter, just as long as each time we become *aware* of anything, we gently return to the Lord.

As we do, we let the other thing go. It is as if the Lord were asking us: "Do you love me more than this?" With our love word we say: "Yes." For these twenty minutes we let everything else go and just give God the space of our lives, so that he can do what he wills. And what he wills most of all is to let us know how much he loves us, how truly he is with us—all the way.

As we choose the Lord and these things float away, all the stress and strain around them float away, too. After the prayer we will be able to attend to them without all that "stuff" around them. This is how our Lord refreshes us psychologically during this prayer, even while he refreshes us physically and spiritually.

So let them go, let them flow—anything and everything that comes up for us—while we just gently and simply use our word of love and choose the Lord.

At the end of your prayer time let the Our Father (or some other prayer) pray itself within you.

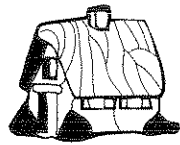
There are many people—thousands and thousands of them—who pray this way regularly, centering twice a day. They have found that *twenty minutes* is a good time to spend in this prayer. It is enough to sort of let go of all the stress and tension that have accumulated since the last meditation and to get a good refreshing rest in the Lord—and to give him time to do some deeper healing if he wants. So we strongly recommend twenty minutes.

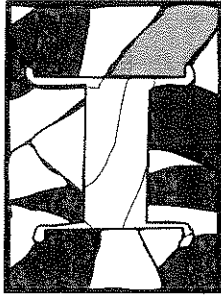
Twice a day. We don't meditate just to enjoy twenty minutes of bliss. We want that shift of consciousness we spoke about; we want to become fully aware of our true self and live out of that reality. We want to live centered lives that freely hold everybody and everything in love—lives that are empowered by the Lord at the center of our being. This shift comes about much more quickly if we do spend time at the center twice a day rather than just once a day.

So: *twenty minutes, twice a day.*

Let us come home to dwell with the Lord.

It Begins with Faith





IN this little book we have been listening to the Lord. He has told us that he dwells with us, that he wants to refresh us, that all things are ours and we are his. We can believe all that, we know it is all true, because he has given us the gift we call faith.

Faith is the ability the Lord gives us to know something is true because he has said it. It is a precious gift because it lets us in on a whole lot—really, on the whole story: “I have made known to you all that my Father has made known to me.”

Like our muscles or our minds, faith is a gift that grows by use. Faith comes from hearing and it grows by hearing. Each day we want to grow in faith. “The just person (and the happy one) lives by faith.” Each day we want to hear the word of God and receive it.

Here is a very simple traditional way of doing this:

SACRED READING

It is well to keep the sacred scriptures enthroned in our home in a place of honor as a real presence of the word in our midst.

1. Take the sacred text with reverence and call upon the Holy Spirit.
2. For five minutes (or longer, if you are so drawn) listen to the Lord speaking to you through the text, and respond to him.
3. At the end of the time, choose a word or phrase (perhaps one will have been "given" to you) to take with you, and thank the Lord for being with you and speaking to you.

The place we can most easily hear the Lord is in the scriptures.

The Bible should be among our most precious possessions. It should never be simply left lying about or shelved among the other books. Rather it should be enthroned in our homes and offices as a real presence of the Lord in our midst.

Each day we want to take some time to listen to the Lord speaking to us in his inspired word.

We take up our Bible with great reverence, aware of God's presence. We kiss the Bible and ask the Holy Spirit who inspired the writer and who lives in us to make the word come alive now in us.

Then we listen for our allotted time. If the Lord speaks to us in the first word, we respond. If not, we just move gently on, listening, ready to respond. If the Lord speaks powerfully to us, we simply abide in his word and presence.

At the end of our time, we thank the Lord (isn't it



wonderful we can have him speak to us whenever we want!) and we take away from our encounter a thought or word to carry with us through the day.

Some days the Lord speaks a word to us, gives it to us. We don't have to take one. His word comes alive and in its liveliness enlivens us.

Other days, the Lord seems absent. We read one word after the other and nothing speaks to us. It is then, at the end of our reading/listening, that we choose a word to carry with us. Oftentimes I have found that this proves to be just the word someone else needs from me as the day moves on. Other times I find that the chosen word suddenly comes alive—a real encounter with the risen Lord—when I least expect it.

At that last supper, Jesus told his disciples (and told all of us): I no longer call you servants, but *friends*, because I make known to you all that the Father has made known to me—all the secrets of my heart.

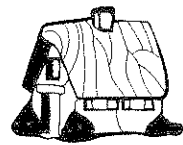
We have been made for a deep intimate friendship with the Lord. Our hearts long for it. As a great sinner who became a great saint once cried: “Our hearts are made for you, O Lord, and they will not rest until they rest in you!”

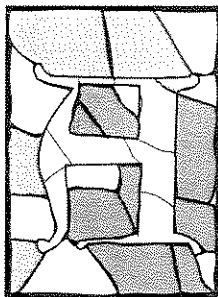
We are not content with just listening to the Lord's words, no matter how wonderful they are. We want a deeper, more experiential union with him. It is like any true friendship: as it grows it needs to go beyond words to doing things together and for each other. The image God himself has frequently used is

that of the marital embrace, that total being to each other. We need those times of prayer when we listen not just with our ears, our eyes, our minds but more with our hearts, with our whole being.

Faith is the gateway to intimacy. And faith grows by hearing.

The Prodigal Father





S Jesus spoke a very mixed crowd gathered around. On the fringes were the big shots, the Pharisees who had all the answers, the scribes who knew the law, and the priests, the holy ones. They looked down on the motley crew pressing in to hear Jesus—a sinful crowd that did not know the law.

What was more painful to Jesus was the fact that many of the poor little ones who were listening to him readily believed that they were indeed the sinful ones. They knew their sins too well. They longed to hear words that would bring them peace.

Jesus told them then this story.

A rich man had two sons. The older was a very righteous lad, painfully faithful to his duties. He knew he was the firstborn son and heir and took good care of his future inheritance. The younger had other interests in life. He wanted to live to the full.

He asked his good father for whatever money might be coming to him so that he could get on with life. Poor, foolish lad. He chased the pleasures of the moment. The false self had him in its grips. He let others play up to him and live off him. Eventually they went away and left him an unhappy pauper. Ill prepared for life, he could only get the most menial and humiliating jobs.



Finally he came to himself. Deep down he knew his true dignity as the son of his good father. He had forfeited every claim to that dignity. But at least he could throw himself on that good father's mercy—and get a better shake than he was getting out on his own.

So home he headed.

The good father's love had never faltered. Nor had the keen eye of love dimmed. From afar he spied his son, and despite all his age and dignity he ran out to meet the poor little tramp to welcome him home with great love and joy. He had no time for the poor lad's sad tale, at least not now in this moment of new-found joy. There was time only for love and joy and celebration. The past was to be fully forgotten. His son was home—that is all he wanted.

Deep down, I guess all of us question our worthiness. No matter what has been our track record—whether we have some terrible mistakes on our record or just the miserable little collection of human mess-ups that is the common lot of every child of God—we question whether it could really be true: that God loves me, dwells in me, really wants to be my friend, really wants me to be his intimate friend.

That's why Jesus told this story. We are all, in one way or another, prodigals (though some of us haven't even done an awfully good job at being prodigals). But he is even more prodigal. We have gone off, one way or another. But he has stayed at home—in us—waiting for us to return.

It is time to return home.

The way is simple.

Perhaps too simple. We like something really hard. Then we can pat ourselves on the back for having accomplished such a feat. (There's that false self again!)

But he has said: "Unless you become as a little one, you can not enter the kingdom."

The kingdom of God is within.

Come in. Come home. The kingdom is our home. We are the children of the king.

Within we find love. Within we find peace. Within we find our true self, that beautiful person whom God loves so much.

Come home to yourself. Come home to your God.