

... Who loves me as a Father
Luke 15:11–32

1. THE WHITE HANDKERCHIEF

The man sat on the pavement beside the bus stop, and stared at the stones. A few people turned to look at him – his unshaven face, his slumped shoulders, and his broken shoes; but he was not aware of their glances because he was reliving his life. He was no longer a hungry tramp who had slept last night under a railway arch; he was a boy who lived in a small red brick house up the next street, more than twenty years ago now. Perhaps they had bulldozed over the house by now; he hoped they hadn't crushed the pansies. It was strange how well he could remember the pansies, and the swing his dad had made for him, and the path where he had learned to ride his bike. They had saved up for months to buy that bike.

He shrugged impatiently, for the brightness of those pictures hurt him, and his memory travelled on another ten years. The bike had been exchanged for a motor cycle, and he then began to come home less often. He had a job by then and plenty of friends. Mum and dad seemed a bit sad and grey, and the pubs were a lot more fun. He did not really want to remember those years, nor the day when the debts had piled up, and he had gone home meaning to ask for money. They had made him a cup of tea and he had not liked to mention what he had come for. But he knew exactly where his dad kept the money, and later on, when they went out into the garden, it was quite easy to help himself to what he wanted.

That was the last time he had seen them. He had not wanted to go home again after that, and they had lost track of him. He had gone abroad and they knew nothing about the years of wandering nor the prison sentence. But locked in

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his cell at night he had thought a lot about them. Sometimes when he tossed awake, and the moonlight moved across the wall, he used to wonder. Once free, he would love to see them again, if they were still alive, and always supposing they still wanted to see him.

When his time was up he found a job in the town but he could not settle. Something seemed to be drawing him home, with an urge he could not get away from. Every time he went for a walk something reminded him of the small brick house – a clump of pansies, a child on a swing, a little boy running home from school.

He did not want to arrive penniless, and he walked or hitched a good deal of the long journey home. He could have arrived earlier, but twenty miles away he was suddenly overcome with misgivings. What right had he to walk in like this? Could they ever reconcile the haggard man he had become with the boy they had loved and who had so bitterly disappointed them?

He bought some food and spent most of that day sitting under a tree. The letter he posted that evening was quite short, but it had taken him hours to write. It ended with these words – 'I know it is unreasonable of me to suppose that you want to see me,.. so it's up to you. I'll come to the end of the road early Thursday morning. If you want me home, hang a white handkerchief in the window of my old bedroom. If it's there I'll come; if not, I'll wave goodbye to the old house and go on my way.'

And now it was Thursday morning. He had arrived at the end of the street. It was still there! But having got there, he felt in no hurry at all. He just sat down on the pavement and stared at the stones.

Well, he could not put it off forever, and after all they might have moved. If the handkerchief was not there he would make a few enquiries before leaving the town. He had not yet had the courage to face what he would do if they were there and simply did not want him.

He got up painfully, for he was stiff from sleeping out, and the street was still in shadow. Shivering a little, he walked slowly towards the old plane tree where he knew he could see the old house as clear as clear. He would not look till he got there.

He stood under the boughs with his eyes shut for a moment. Then he drew a long breath and looked. Then he stood staring and staring.

The sun was already shining on the little red brick house, but it no longer seemed to be a little red brick house for every wall was festooned with white. Every window was hung with sheets, pillowcases, towels, tablecloths, handkerchiefs and table napkins; and white muslin curtains trailed across the roof from the attic window. It looked like a snow house gleaming in the morning light.

His parents were taking no risks. The man threw back his head and gave a cry of relief. Then he ran up the street and straight in at the open front door.

Keynote: As kind as a father is to his children, so kind is the Lord to those who honour him. Psalm 103:13

Let the wicked leave their way of life and change their way of thinking. Let them turn to the Lord, our God; he is merciful and quick to forgive. Isaiah 55:7

Prayer: Thank you Father, that you love me more dearly than any earthly father, for all love flows from you. Your love never forgets me, even when I forget you. You always welcome me back even when I have sinned. You love to forgive me even when I don't deserve it. Thank you for your everlasting love.

Think: Can you say for yourself that God loves you? In what ways are you aware of his love?