I have a confession to make. If I had a choice, I would stay away from church on Mothering Sunday. I loathe all the commercialisation that surrounds Mother’s Day, and I feel ambivalent about accepting flowers at an act of worship, having had some bad experiences in the past, both before and particularly after I became a mother. I have endured acts of worship that contrived both to celebrate women solely for their fulfilment of an idealised notion of motherhood, and simultaneously to make entire congregations feel horribly guilty about their relationships with their own mothers. So, I have often been wont to respond to the historic tradition that one may relax the strict rigours of the season at this mid-point of Lent, by choosing to have a lie in, or to go for a walk in the spring sunshine, instead of attending services.

Given my rather jaded attitude, there seemed something wholly appropriate to me in the fact that our gospel reading – the familiar parable of the prodigal son – so clearly describes a dysfunctional family. We can all relate to this narrative at different levels, regardless of which is the character with whom we most identify. As an eldest child, I’ve never doubted who I am in this story. I have a younger brother who wandered from the path so often (and disappeared from all contact for extended periods) that over the years whole herds of fatted calves have been slaughtered to mark his eventual returns from these absences in foreign lands, and wardrobes full of best robes draped about his shoulders. I, meanwhile, smouldered on the side-lines, resentful that my dutiful presence and regular attentiveness should pass seemingly unnoticed. But Jesus did not recount this parable in order to reinforce our preconceived ideas about natural justice and fairness within families, still less to affirm the rightfulness of the inevitable jealousy that all siblings express at different times, regardless of where they come in birth order. It is a
much richer text theologically and one that, for all its familiarity, it is worth unpicking in a little more detail.

Immediately before this chapter, Luke had written about the urgent need to repent in response to Jesus’ message and had told an extended parable about rejection from the kingdom. Here he offered an insight into how God will respond if we do indeed listen and repent sufficiently to turn our lives into fresh directions. Our reading began with a description of the divisions within the people between those who would listen to Jesus’ message and those who refused to do so (cf. Luke 7: 29-30). Luke contrasted the tax-collectors and sinners, who represent the outcast and the poor, who are able to respond positively to Jesus’ teachings, with the Pharisees and the scribes, who stand for the rich and powerful, who reject his call. Then, in response to the complaint of the religious leaders about Jesus’ accessibility as a prophet to these ‘lost ones’, Luke told two parables which we did not hear read: about the lost sheep (15: 3-7) and the lost coin (15: 8-10). In both, the joy of the finder in retrieving what had been lost serves to rebuke the grumbling of the scribes about Jesus’ willingness to consort with sinners, the lost among God’s people, instead of joining in the celebration. Then Luke recounted today’s parable about losing and finding: that of the lost son, whose father met him while he was still far off and brought him home. This is not a story about the loss and restoration of material possessions but a much more complicated tale about messy personal relationships, from which possessions are not absent, but are secondary to the main argument.

So, who lies at the heart of this story? As listeners, where do we locate ourselves as we hear it recounted? In this season of Lent, it seems most obvious to see ourselves as the younger son, the sinner, to whom his father gave so much, but who squandered those gifts in riotous living. We may try to reassure ourselves that we have not, and would never, sink to quite these depths of dissipation, but we must know in our hearts that the particular ways in which we have sinned are in essence no different, if not perhaps quite so spectacular, nor so public. We may recognise and empathise with the desolation of the son’s sense of being lost to the point that he might as well be dead. This common human emotion is made the more difficult by the fact that he knows that he has brought this fate upon himself and has no one else to blame. He has contrived to turn his back on his loving (and affluent) family, forsake the familiarity of home and friends, and take himself off to a foreign country where his money bought him the false friendship of those willing to relieve him of his cash and share in his dissolute living. For a Jewish audience, the implications of dwelling with swine will have resonated acutely; to his other sins and
derelictions, the son added the abandonment of his religious heritage. He has not honoured his father and mother, and he has not respected God’s holy laws. Reduced to utter penury, he had become in effect a non-person; he might, indeed, as well be dead. Yet, even in his desolation, he is not without hope of grace. For in uttering again the word with which he had begun the whole, sad adventure, ‘Father’, he can find the redemption for which he longs.

If we focus too much on relating our feelings to those of the younger son, we forget about the father, who is central to the tale as a whole. His extraordinary love for his son causes him, as soon as he sees his youngest in the distance, to rush out to welcome him home. This is clearly a moment for which he has been watching and waiting; and now that it is finally come, he cannot restrain himself. Nor does he indulge in articulating any of the anger and disappointment with which he must have struggled during the long period of his son’s absence. His love and grace are too great for him to hold them back. The very extravagance of his response – the rushing out, the killing of the fattened calf, producing of the best robe, the valuable ring, the sandals for the boy’s calloused feet – all speak of the abundance of grace. If we are the sinning younger son – and in some sense we all are, of course – then this father is our father: God’s love for us is so great that whatever our sin, when we finally recognise it as such, turn away from it and back to him, then he too will come and meet us and welcome us home. And because this is a moment that he has long awaited, when he does, his rejoicing will be so great that it can only be measured in abundance, excess of generosity. Just as we recognised that being lost was equivalent to being dead, so we now understand that better than life itself is living with the knowledge that we have been found and are now enveloped in the love of God.

Where, then, does this leave the elder brother (the one with whom I have always felt such sympathy)? He has dutifully done everything right, stayed at home, honoured his parents, done his brother’s share of the work during his absence, slaving away if not without complaint, then certainly without any tangible reward. We can hardly wonder that the excess of their father’s response leads him to refuse petulantly to have anything to do with the celebrations. And when his father comes to find him, he responds with an outpouring of sibling jealousy, exaggerating both his own ill-treatment and the extent of his brother’s culpability.

Where I think it is too easy to fail to take away the full message from this parable is in stopping at this point. Over-identifying with the wronged elder brother and sympathising with his petulant behaviour so much that we fail to keep listening to the
end. We are all guilty of the sins of the elder as well; we too have failed to conceal our pride, jealousy, anger and self-righteousness. We have been ready to judge others for their most visible faults, without accepting how many of these we also share. And so, in our own ways, we, too, have been lost, but lost inside the family, not out in a foreign land. Complacent in our own faithfulness to God within the family of the Church, we have been in danger of losing the wider perspective, of wanting to cling to what is familiar and right according to our own standards, preferring justice over mercy and forgiveness.

But in this parable, the father treats both his sons equally. He came out to meet the one that had been lost to bring him home; and he came out – away from the party and the rejoicing – to find his equally-loved eldest child. To extend the same generosity and love to him as he had to his brother. To forgive him his sins and remind him that his love knows no limitations, is not dependent on our capacity to respond, but is always constant: ‘you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’

In our post-communion prayer, when we give thanks for the gifts of Christ’s body and blood on which we have fed at his table, we will say words that draw directly on this parable and reinforce its message. For in this story we are, unusually, not one character but two. The theological point is this: we are both the son who was lost but is found, and also the son who never strayed but had lost himself by forgetting how great is our Father’s love.

Father of all,
we give you thanks and praise
that when we were still far off, you met us in your Son and brought us home.
Dying and living, he declared your love
gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory.
Amen