

# Reflection at our online worship on Sunday 13 March 2022 by Kath Oates, Pioneer Enabler

(Reading: Luke 15. 11-20)

## The Bear

The story of the lost or prodigal son is probably one of the best known in the Bible. It tells of a young man who leaves home and goes astray but who eventually finds his way back. There are lots of different ways in which we can go astray and also lots of ways to come home. This is a story which I wrote as part of my pioneering training and I'd like to share it with you.

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He'd found the bear in an old trunk; the one he'd taken to university with him. He'd been sorting the contents of the loft ready for yet another house move, when he'd decided to open the trunk and see what was inside. And there, alongside the evidence of a previous academic life, the hand-written essays, the dusty books, tickets to student productions, a Christian Union term card and a college scarf, sat the bear. **His** bear from his childhood.

He picked it up and held it at arm's length, looking carefully at its thoughtful expression. "Hello, Mr Brown", he said, half expecting the bear to reply. "I'd forgotten you were there. It's been a long time." Mr Brown had been a present from

his grandmother and had been given to him when he was born so that meant they were both 60 years old.

He could see that the bear had seen better days; his fur was missing in places and he was bald, rather like his owner. One arm was hanging loose with the stuffing poking out and an ear hung on by a thread, but his eyes were bright and intelligent. He felt a sense of nostalgia as memories of his childhood came flooding back. It had been a happy time and Mr Brown had shared all the joys and the occasional tears with him. He'd even gone with him to university, but the important place he had once held had soon been filled by friends, particularly girlfriends, and Mr Brown had been relegated to the trunk.

The trunk had travelled the world with him as part of his belongings, but he hadn't opened it for years, as its dusty contents showed. He had moved many times, which had made it hard to settle and make close friends. He'd never married and had no siblings so when his parents had died he had felt very alone. Except it now dawned on him that Mr Brown had always been there.

He looked at the bear and felt rather sorry for him. He wondered if he could be repaired, restored to his former self, to the bear he had known as a child. But would that be the right thing to do? The bear's baldness had been caused by the love of a small boy who had carried him everywhere and held him close for so many years. His arm and his ear

had also suffered because of these hugs. But the bear looked a bit neglected now; the years in a trunk had not suited him. Maybe he needed a bit of love and a hug, rather than a restoration of his youthful looks.

He remembered a programme he'd recently seen on TV. He wasn't in the habit of watching it. He'd been in the process of changing channels but had become rather absorbed in the stories of priceless treasures being brought back to life by the repairers. Precious articles, often seemingly beyond saving, were resurrected and with them all the memories they held. Maybe he should do this for Mr Brown. Maybe he could make the bear feel loved again; maybe he would like to have the bear back in his life again with all the memories they shared.

It was while the bear was away at the repair shop that he looked in the trunk again and spotted the mug. He hadn't realised it was a mug at first as it was wrapped in a very old piece of newspaper. In fact, it was wrapped in rather a lot of newspaper; someone had obviously been careful that it shouldn't be damaged. The mug had a picture of Peter Rabbit on it and next to it was a plate with the same design. He remembered; it had been a christening present from his godmother. Further down in the same box was a certificate, with his name, alongside those of his parents, godparents and the Vicar. There was a family photograph with his godmother proudly holding him, everyone with beaming smiles on their faces. Digging deeper into the box he found a well-thumbed children's Bible; he recalled how

he used to read it at bedtime and how he had loved the stories of Daniel in the lion's den and Joseph and his dreams.

He sat down and opened it. He hadn't looked at a Bible in years, faith had no place in his life now. He turned the familiar pages and looked at the stories he had loved so much as a boy. Then, to his surprise, his eyes filled with tears. He wept as he thought about the child who had read this book; he wept for the man reading it now. He wept for the people he had lost and he wept for the faith he had lost. He felt so alone. How he longed to feel loved, to feel restored, to feel whole again.

A few days later he collected the bear from the repair shop; a seemingly ordinary day but one he would always remember. He waited at the desk while the receptionist called the craftsman to tell him that a customer had arrived. "What are you hoping for?" she asked. He wasn't sure. He felt incredibly nervous. Eventually the craftsman arrived carrying Mr Brown and started to explain the work that had been done. But he wasn't able to listen; all he could see was his beloved bear sitting on the counter, with his arms open wide. His bear still loved him, his bear had forgiven him for neglecting him for all these years, his bear was just happy that they had found each other again. He swept Mr Brown into his arms and held him tight, and as he did he felt the loving arms of God surround them both.

Amen

