

**A story about God..... "The Prodigal Father"**

"Come on Dad, I'm 18! I am old enough to get married! Why don't you let me have my half of the inheritance while I am still alive, instead of waiting 'til I'm too old to have any real fun with it! I want to go and seek my fortune. I'll get a job. I'll buy a business and I'll be great in the city!" And on and on he went until his father said "Alright! You can have it and go and get on with your dazzling life!"

Andy had always been a busy kid. Fast at school, fast at sports, and fast with the girls as he got older. But he could never settle. He was always looking at the next great idea, for the next challenge, the next thrill. He would never be happy as a farmer, his father knew. So he let him go and find out what life was about.

How his mother wept as she watched him leave! How she scolded her husband for letting her son go! How she sat sad and quiet in the sad and suddenly very quiet house now he was gone! And how his father's heart was aching and anxious for his son, his bright, young, wild son.

But Barry was still his. Where Andy was quicksilver Barry was oak-solid. Barry was a worker, a reliable, friendly, thoroughly rooted guy. Give him a direction and he would work till it was done. He would be the one to support his parents when they got old. He was the rock you could rely on.

It wasn't long before news came back to the farm from the city. Barry had asked some of the crop traders to keep an eye on his brother. What they told him was only what he expected. Andy had not found a job or a trade. He had found a fancy place to live and a wide circle of partying friends and a warm welcome in every club, bar and restaurant. He was the big man in town with money to burn. Barry had that "I could see that coming a mile off" feeling. But he didn't tell his parents. He couldn't figure out why his Dad had given half his wealth to that fool of a boy. Barry didn't hate his brother, he just had little respect for him. Whatever Barry would have done, Andy would have done the opposite. He knew it would turn out badly.

As days turned to weeks and weeks to months the quiet at meal times became deeper. Andy's chatter and sparkle was so absent. And there was no word from him. His parents said little, but the looks on their faces revealed their worst fears.

"Why don't you do something!" she said to his father. "He needs to find his own way." he replied. And holding back from running to save his son was almost breaking his heart. Each evening he would sit in the room upstairs that looked over the road towards the city. If Andy came back he would come down that road, and he looked with longing and hope and prayer. He too knew what a fool his son could be, how he lived in the moment with little thought for tomorrow. He knew he was generous, open-handed and trusted everyone. He was playful and happy and also selfish and vain. But that was who he was, and if he was to change it would be on his own.

The depression hit the whole area. No rains and then no trade and then no work for the men and women of the towns and villages. The farm had resources, but only just enough for the family and the people who worked there. People looking for food and work came by, asking hopefully at the farm gate. They would receive a meal, but no more. And they would all be asked about Andy. A few knew about him, but said he had disappeared from the city. His parents grew sick with anxiety. The father watched the road and prayed and hoped. Andy had few skills and fewer muscles. Would he make it through?

It seemed at last as if no one else was coming looking for hope in the countryside. The road was empty now most days. The father still sat in the window seat, and drank his tea in silence. Glancing up

from the floor he saw, in the distance, a figure moving, just coming into view. Every time this happened his heart had quickened and every time it had been in vain, yet it was in him to hope and hope and hope again. He watched. He knew Andy would be in bright colours, upright and jaunty. This man was walking slowly, tired and without any sign of that spring in his step of his young son. But still he watched him come. This man was frail and thin, dressed in rags, dirty like so many others, and his heart began to sink again. But then the man swept the hair from his eyes. It was a movement his son had so often made. Could it be him? He stood up and looked as hard as his eyes could stand. "Go and see!" he said to himself, and up he got. By the time he could see he knew, and when he knew he ran, and when he ran some of his men ran with him.

The look in Andy's eyes were not what the workers remembered of him. They were not confident and challenging as they always had been. He seemed beaten down, and ashamed. He was barefoot and filthy and skinny looking. His father was barreling towards him, but he knelt down and began a speech, or an apology, like a confession. It was hard to hear the words, his voice had become weak. But he never got it out. His Dad was all over him. He was hugging him and then stepping back to look at him and then hugging him again, and the old man had tears running down his face. Andy just stood looking stunned. His Dad kept holding him by the shoulders and saying "I thought you were dead." Again and again.

Then it was back to the farm. There were instructions to set up a party, and his Mum was there crying and hugging and flapping about with clothes and getting a bath filled for him. A feeling of relief and excitement was just bubbling. All work had stopped and only the kitchens were busy.

By the time dusk was falling the food had been cooked, served and eaten. The music was playing and the whole village was there dancing.

Then Barry came in from the north edge of the property. He had been clearing ditches through the heat of the day with a couple of the men. They were tired. When he got close enough he could see it was different, and he could hear the music and the singing and you could see people dancing in the courtyard. The men rushed in for drinks and food. It was so long since there had been a party everyone was making the best of it. But Barry stopped as if there was a fence in front of him. He sat down and it was like a thundercloud had gathered over his head. He was red-faced in anger.

He wouldn't come in for anyone. He just said "It's him! Isn't it?"

Then his Dad came out. He sat down next to Barry, just like it was normal. Barry let it all out on the flood his rage. He told his Dad everything about the parties, the hookers, the booze and the rest of it. He held back nothing of the mess and the shame of his brother's life in the city. His Dad just listened. Barry went on about all the work he did that Andy never did, about how he never threw parties or asked for money. He said how he always did what was right and never stepped out of line once.

When Barry was all finished his Dad put his arm around him and they sat for a while. Then he said, "We thought he was dead. We thought he could have been killed, or just died. We thought if he was alive he'd be so ashamed he would never come home". "You knew?" said Barry in shock. "We knew. We pretty well knew what he'd do before he left. He was an idiot, your brother. A sweet, lovely idiot. But he had to learn that himself." They sat in silence quite a while. "The farm, you know, it's yours. Just yours, after us. Andy can have the cottage down by the stream. The rest is yours, and you'll be in charge." You could see Barry softening, the thundercloud was breaking up. His face wasn't beet red anymore. "Come in," said his Dad, "come in and see him. He looks like a drowned rat. He needs you to give him a hug. He needs your forgiveness. He needs your love. He's your only brother. He was dead, but now we have him back alive. I thought we'd lost him. But look! He's found again. Come in with me!"

And he did.