

Preached by the Revd Dr Michael Piret, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford, on the Second Sunday after Trinity (13 June) 2010.

On the tomb of Robert Louis Stevenson, in Samoa, these words were engraved when he died in 1894 – they're the closing lines of one of his own poems:

*Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.*

Perfectly, simply, the lines speak of the resolution of homecoming – which we all know at least something about. It needn't be on the grand scale of an Odyssey or quest, returning home at the end of a life-defining journey. It might just be that feeling of restored tranquility we have at the end of a long day, when at last we get back to our own place, and sense that we'll be set right again in our personal haven, surrounded by things or people we know and trust. Or it may have nothing at all to do with any physical space. It may just be about where we are within ourselves – having the quiet confidence we see in Lady Julian of Norwich, when she feels deep within that 'all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.'

What images are called up for you, I wonder, within your heart, when you think of the word 'home'? Maybe it's a place, or the company of a particular person sitting across from you at a table after a long journey. Maybe it's a place you can never go back to, a parental home – or a grandparent's home – where you'd be a total stranger, now, if you went and knocked on the door. Maybe it's the half-remembered sound of someone's voice calling you when you were a small child. Or a piece of music which will always make you feel at home within yourself, putting any sort of chaos back into its box again, cutting the biggest problems down to size.

Restored perspective, returning to the place where we belong – that moment of coming into the haven, finding resolution, rightness and repose – is one of the things that's going on in today's Gospel reading. The sinful woman, whom tradition identifies as Mary Magdalen our patron, is making her way home to God. She has come to the feet of Christ, after untold wanderings – bringing nothing but penitence and adoration. She comes to the Lord, as the Prodigal Son came home to his father. She has nothing to say in her own defence, nothing but faith that she will not be turned away. She comes as a debtor – but as a debtor rich in the knowledge that the debt she owes is so great that there's no way she can possibly pay it back.

Again and again, Scripture teaches us that this is what coming home to God is like. Turning to Christ not with confidence in what we have done, just with confidence in his willingness to receive us and transform us. Returning in faith that, whatever has come before (it doesn't matter what), forgiveness and restoration can be ours. Our mistakes and wanderings, our wilful sins – however much they may have changed us – do not change God. Listen to St Augustine's words in the *Confessions*: 'Let us come home at last to you, O Lord, lest we be lost. For in you our good abides Nor do we fear that there is no home to which we can return. We fell from it; but your eternity is our home – and it does not fall, because we are away.'

God's eternity, our home, continues to stand, no matter what. It is no less secure, if we ourselves have wandered away. Always remember that, especially those of you are now getting ready to leave Magdalen, those won't be back again in the autumn. Your home in God will not fall. It will continue to stand forever – longer than this Chapel, infinitely longer than your Schools results, longer than your first job or any job you'll ever have, longer than whatever successes you win in the big wide world, longer than your worst disappointments and failures.

So as the days, months, and years go by – over your whole lifetime – cultivate within yourself the habit of coming home to God. Exercise that habit, make it a reflex, keep coming back to the ground of your being.

Try to do it daily, through a regular life of prayer. Try to do it weekly, by becoming part of a church, sooner, not later – and really make your attendance one of the basic fixed points of your week, no matter how chaotic life becomes. Indeed, the more chaotic your life, the more turbulent the seas, the more you need the compass of regular religious practice, prayer, and a Christian community to help guide you. Many people say they don't need a church to walk in the way of Jesus; but I doubt that most of these solo fliers have really found a satisfactory replacement for gatherings of people which are (in most ways) like this one: gatherings where there's a common touchstone of faith that we rehearse together, where we can reflect with others on the holy Scriptures, and where there is shared communion in the Sacraments – with common celebration of the blessings they give.

Sometimes departing students feel a strange uneasiness, even alarm, to think this means they will have to start worshipping in a place which is not Magdalen Chapel. That can be especially unsettling for those who came to faith here in the first place. How can I be inspired, some wonder, without this lovely building, without 'service high and anthems clear,' without the uplifting music of the Choir, without sermons from Ralph Walker? But look on the bright side: at least the benches in the pews, and the kneelers, can hardly be less comfortable anywhere else. Besides, adopting a new church will gently teach you a most important lesson: that the God who keeps calling us home, is every bit as much there, as he is here. And in my experience at least, he always has funny ways of showing us that, often by opening a new door, into some aspect of faith, or understanding, or prayer, or practical action, which was a closed book to us before. We may well find that our sense of God's presence becomes more powerful when some of the outward beauty of worship has been taken away. We may find that less is more, that it releases us to become more solidly grounded in the most basic aspects of faith and life. The infinite God, infinitely resourceful, is revealed to us in an infinite variety of ways. So, for you who are leaving: put the business of finding a church high on your list, as soon as you move. It's at least as important as choosing curtains and chairs and a bed for your new room or flat – because we're talking about the place in which you will be called, week in and week out, to your true and ultimate home in God.

For some of you, maybe *most* of you at some stage, a period may come when you don't go to church at all, not because you haven't found one, but because you feel you don't have it in you, honestly to go to church. It may be a stage at which you have thoughtful, carefully considered objections to belief. A stage when you would argue, in a rigorously critical way, that there is no convincing reason for thinking our existence on this earth is anything more than a fluke; and this position may have endured for a good long time, you know it isn't just a cloud passing briefly through the sky, but a real loss of faith. When that is the case, I think you have to respect your own position, to 'be where you are,' for the time

being, for the sake of truth and conscience. Then, you can only make sure you keep thinking critically and rigorously – staying in conversation with others on the matter (especially those who are prepared to argue with you) – and see what happens over time. Like many former atheists, you may well be guided back to belief, perhaps a stronger and sturdier belief than you had before.

But there is quite a different thing that can happen. We're prone sometimes passively just to withdraw from religious practice through the default secularity of contemporary culture – and then dress it up as a 'loss of faith,' when in fact it's just inaction, or the passive extension of a temporary mood of doubt. Now that is a temptation to resist, because it can just be a legitimising of spiritual and intellectual laziness – putting a designer label of agnosticism or atheism on a position which would actually require much more thought to adopt seriously, than we have bothered to give it. Remember, some degree of doubt is part of the territory of faith. Remember doubt is the natural shadow cast in the light of faith, and the only way to be completely free of it is never to believe in anything or anyone at all.

But even our losses of faith – active or passive, justified or unjustified – they are all part of the terrain which we as reflective beings travel on our journey through life. And just as God fully and perfectly understands the workings of our minds, his understanding must fully and perfectly reach down to the depths of the reasons why, from time to time, we separate ourselves from him. And still he stands ready to welcome us back, always, to our true and eternal home in him. The story of Mary Magdalen our patron, the story of the Prodigal Son, the story of countless great saints like Augustine – they all show that wherever we roam, over the whole of our lives (through folly, sin, honest doubt, or mere distraction), our home in God stands firm.

So keep coming back to the God who is waiting always to welcome you home. Let the words of Isaiah dwell in your hearts: 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.' And the prayer of Augustine: 'Let us come home at last to you, O Lord ... for in you our good abides Nor do we fear that there is no home to which we can return. Your eternity is our home – and it does not fall, when we are away.'¹

¹ Isaiah 30:15; Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk IV, ch 16