

Going home

The Office always feels like home. He drew my attention to this when I mentioned how I had been listening to an ex-offender talking about his prison experience. 'The worst thing,' the ex-prisoner told the interviewer, 'Was not being able to go home at the end of the day.'

The words had stayed with me, giving me a new and wider understanding of prison. I thought of the West African prison I regularly visited many years ago now. For some of inmates it was more a holiday camp than a prison, with comfortable beds to sleep on and a meal guaranteed once a day. It was still a prison though. It's 'guests' were not able to go home at the end of the day. If prisons are defined as places with no going home then they can be found everywhere. Pictures flowed across the world window; places with no physical bars or locked doors. Under the river bridge I saw the young vagrant rolling up his plastic bags to make a pillow; in a bed and breakfast room, booked indefinitely, I saw a depressed middle-aged divorcee; in the hospice a young mother sat beside the last bed she will ever rest on. He gave me thoughts of other

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prisoners too, including people ridden with guilt who have excommunicated themselves from family and friends, and then that vast ocean of all ages, herded under the blue plastic sheeting of refugee settlements - people who

cannot go home.

As though coming into sharper focus the scenes in the window became more personal. He showed me Reg. Reg had turned up on our doorstep many times and incoherently asked for money, refusing food which would have benefited him more than alcohol. He made other, more sober, visits when he told me about himself and producing a battered old wallet, which became mine after his death, he would show me the pictures of his children. Tearfully, this big-hearted man who had never learned to express his love, told me how frustration led back to drinking and drinking to violence, and how violence had broken his marriage and his home. Reg stuffed that wallet back into his pocket and said, 'I want to see my kids, but I can't go home.'

The managing director had more to show me before we left the window of memories. There were flashes of just a few of the many homes I have been welcomed into through the years as friend,

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minister, guest. As a pastor I have been privileged to have welcome access to many homes. If there had been time to linger at each memory, I would have seen such a variety of places. No stately homes that I can recall. A few of a more affluent kind but most quite ordinary and some mud-brick and straw. But then I am describing houses, not homes. The home was inside the houses where I found deep friendship, intimacy and the freedom

to be myself. That was true especially of the African homes where friendship slipped so easily into being accepted as family. When I hear the spiritual, *Going Home*, I think I can grasp something of the agonised soul-wrenching felt by captives who had known real family.

With captives and home in mind I was ready for his whisper - *Patrick!* The window scene changed as I recalled how just a little while ago we stood on cold, windswept fells close to the place where it is believed Saint Patrick spent his early childhood. Nearby had stood the Christian home where his priest grandfather and his father, Calpurnius, who was a deacon taught him their faith in Jesus. Standing there I imagined the community in which Patrick's father was an important official, streaming out of their wood and wattle dwellings

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to welcome home the young man they had not seen for fifteen years. At six years of age Patrick had been carried off with others to slavery by marauding raiders from Ireland. During the next six years of captivity in a pagan country the young boy's faith deepened and his escape to Gaul led him to new experiences and stronger faith in God. At home again in a world changing with the departure of Roman control and the Christian faith in revival, Patrick felt the call of God to another home - the place of his captivity. So began his part in the evangelising of Ireland. The young Patrick had discovered that home was being in the will of God - home was where Christ was.

That thought has become meaningful for me as I look back on a life-time of regular 'moving on' until now with most close family scattered and original homes left behind it is difficult to feel we 'belong' in any one place. Yet we still belong to the family people - children, brothers, sisters, cousins and we still have those places where we are welcome to be ourselves- where we can be at home.

Now the Bible window showed me the house of Lazarus at Bethany. That must have been home for Jesus. We think of it as the place to

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which he retreated, where he relaxed and where he could speak playfully to the sisters. But home for him, as it was for Patrick, was where he was doing his Father's will. Home was heaven - but that is a thought we left until a future visit to the office. Of course I saw him at Nazareth where he was raised in a growing family, but home was more than that to him. There came a time when the people of Nazareth made him feel homeless. I wonder how Mary lived through that time of his rejection. Just as I wonder how she felt when visiting Jesus out of concern for his welfare and heard him say, 'Who is my mother?' I am sure she understood when he said of the crowd around him - 'these are my mother and my brothers' - this is home - where I am in my Father's will. Mary would understand. After all she had accepted the same way of trusting obedience when she

accepted her call to be his mother.

So his office has become home. It is the place of being oneself; of being in his presence; in his will and at the door of his eternal home.

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