



## The Father's House

Mark left the church disappointed. He had been sure this morning would be different, but once again he had his flat 'after service' feeling. The sermon had not been too bad - a bit long, though listen-able - but the songs were so dreary. As usual, lately, he had hoped for something more. Deep inside he knew he was yearning for what someone had once called 'the feel of God' - a closeness to Jesus. 'It's me of course,' he told himself. 'Surely the 'feel of God' should be here in the 'house of God', with the people of God, worshipping God! Why doesn't it touch me?

In no mood for small talk, Mark did not hang about after the service. He would have more time to make his regular call on Jim Welch. He called most Sundays when he had time and Jim appreciated it. Jim had always taken an interest in Mark and encouraged him through his youth, especially when things had been difficult between his own parents. Jim didn't get out much now and felt the loneliness of widower-hood even more. He was still fiercely independent though. That was the root of the problem with Rachel, his daughter.

Mark was surprised to see Rachel coming out of the side door of her father's house. She was rolling up a shopping bag and had a folded paper clenched in her teeth. She pulled the paper from her mouth. 'Shopping list,' she grinned. 'I missed church this morning, but I came here instead. I had to sort things out. It's all right now.' She kept walking towards the gate. 'Must rush, the shop shuts at half past twelve.' At the gate she called out, 'Thanks, Mark!'

Inside the house, Mark waited for Jim to tell him what had happened. He did not have to wait long. 'Did you see Rachel? She came round to say 'sorry', but I got in first.' Mark looked away as Jim dabbed his eyes. 'It's a simple word, isn't it, 'sorry'?. Yet it takes a lot of getting out sometimes.'

Mark didn't need to hear the story again, but Jim was still going to tell it. It had been one of those ridiculous situations that both he and Rachel would laugh about in time. Jim knew he was getting less capable, but was reluctant to let Rachel take over housework and shopping. Then one morning she had caught him in a low 'memories' mood. 'It's my house and I'll manage.' He had blurted out in an unusually loud voice. Rachel, who was known to be a little over sensitive, had taken offence. Soon old sores had been opened and irretrievable words blurted out till Rachel had stormed out, vowing never to return.

For about four weeks now, Mark had listened to both sides of the story as each party had rationalised and justified their words and actions. He had tried to say the right thing and pacify them, reluctant to give any practical help for fear of being accused of taking sides. Then last week he had decided to risk their friendship and pointed out to Jim how he was hurting himself as well as Rachel, and how his unforgiving attitude was colouring everything he did. Jim had replied only, 'I know', and then changed the subject.

Knowing Rachel would be back with the shopping soon, Mark did not stay long. As he rose to leave, Jim struggled to his feet and gripped Mark's hand. 'Thanks,' he said. He followed Mark to the door. 'It wasn't just what you said. I knew all that. It was the fact that you cared, - like the Lord cares - I know it hurt you too.' It was too emotional a moment. Mark left quickly.

It was as he walked up the lane that the truth hit him. He stopped and stared unseeing at the ducks on the pond. It was a moment of worship. He felt that God-nearness he had been searching for. He had come close to Jesus ... in the father's house.