SERMON - COMING HOME TO GOD.

So today we are doing things a little differently. Originally this was going to be the normal 20-minute sermon around the theme of the Prodigal Son and '***coming home'*** to the Father's heart.

But with 6 of our people feeling the irresistible call of the Spirit on their lives to be baptised – a recognition that this IS the sermon. 6 of our own church community hearing the call to the sacrament of Baptism IS the Good News of our faith, in action.

So for the next 8 mins or so I'm just going to unpack the power of what it is we are both ***witnessing***, ***celebrating,*** but also very much ***participating*** in today.
Still doing it through the lens of our Gospel reading but set within this wider context.

Because in so many ways the baptism of **Tam**, **Rowan, Helen, Judy**, **Anthony and Yan** –brings together all the threads of our sermon series that we've been exploring around sacred journey's - particularly today's theme. The journey of **C*oming home to God.***

And all of these threads are captured in one of the most well-known spiritual wisdoms given to us by St Augustine. **"You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."**

The existential truth that Augustine nails with these words is this.
Human beings are **created by God - and for God**.

Beyond all that's fleeting in this world - true meaning, and true belonging and a sense of peace - can only be found in communion with the Creator. Until we realise this truth our hearts will always feel ***'restless'***

It's the deep truth I explored a few weeks back with these words from Jesus that are the original source of St Augustine's wisdom. **"I pray Father, that just as you are *in* me and I am *in* you. May they also be *in* us.** Our true **'home'** says Jesus - is to be IN an intimate, reciprocal relationship with the Father and the Son through the power of the Holy Spirit.

When they make their ***home*** **in** us, and we make our ***home*** **i**n them. Abiding and dwelling. This says Jesus, is how we bear life-giving fruit. And at it's very core, this is the truth that all our candidates will be declaring and affirming in their baptisms. **You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and today we make our home in You.**

And I believe this is ***why*** todays gospel reading is one of the most well-known and most loved stories from Jesus. Because it speaks into this profound truth.

A foolish son wanders a *long way off* from his relationship with his Father.
But then comes to the realisation that this disconnection has come at a significant spiritual cost and he makes the crucial decision to repent (a change of heart and direction) and begin the journey ***'to come home'*** to the heart of the Father.

The reason this parable is such an enduring one - is because we all recognise something of *ourselves* in the story.

We all wander away from the Father's love. Sometimes very far away, sometimes a little each day. But we also recognise the restlessness in our hearts to return 'home'. We sang about it at the beginning of our worship.
Prone to wander Lord, I feel it - Prone to leave the God I love.
Here's my heart Lord take and seal it. Seal it for Thy courts above.

There are so many layers of truth in this Prodigal story - but as we celebrate these baptisms – there's just THE most important truth at the core of it., that I want to put in front of us for today. And it's all captured in one sentence from Jesus.

"While the son was* still *a long way off - the father saw him, ran to him, embraced and kissed him."

In this one sentence from Jesus, we get the reason WHY our Christian faith is such 'Good News. Wherever we may wander from the intimacy of our 'true home' - God is always waiting to greet us with an embrace of extravagant, unconditional, transforming Love and Grace. God's lavish love.

So as I said at the beginning, you and I are not just watching **Rowan, Judy, Helen, Tam, Anthony and Yan** getting baptised. We are all in a participation with this Holy Sacrament. All of our journeys are wrapped up in their journeys. We are all on the same journey of realising our ***'true spiritual home'***. That we are created by God, for God. And we all travel it with the assurance of God's unconditional extravagant love.

So as we witness this significant moment for our candidates today - let us enter into their journey. Let's remember that Baptism is about *'putting to death'* all that disconnects us from our intimate union with God through Christ. A '*dying to self*' of all that diminishes us and steals the good fruit of Christ from our lives.

Baptism is about a spirit of '**surrendering in trust'.** Giving to God all that we carry that burdens us and causes dis-connection and dis-location.

And where our hearts have become hardened by the slings and arrows of life - baptism is about a cleansing and a healing. To emerge from the waters with a heart softened by Gods transforming grace. As Paul declares, ***anyone who is IN Christ is a New Creation. The old has passed and the new has come.***

Jeremy and I have had the huge privilege of walking alongside the 6 candidates about to be baptised and to hear some of their very moving stories,

They all of course have different stories but there is a common thread that holds all their stories together. To get to this moment has required the ***courage*** to *surrender,* and *trust* in God's transforming love and grace.

We have 3 people new to faith from different cultures, which brings its own unique challenges, but they have shown the courage to commit to Christ.

And Tam has been brought to this moment because she was touched by a simple expression of Christian love and kindness from 2 people in our community.

Some of the stories have required the courage and the *vulnerability* to bring past wounds to God. To find a cleansing and a healing. The courage to surrender and trust. As one person said to us… ***"I felt the opening of my heart and the love and presence of God."***

And we have a true Prodigal story, with Rowan taking a path without God for over 30 years - and then in a time of rock bottom beginning a return journey 'home'. A journey that has brought him to this significant moment. As he so rightly said to us, "*the journey continues."* As it does for every one of us.