

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Fourth Sunday of Lent

27th March 2022

All Saints' Marseille – Aix-en-Provence

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Rembrandt, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg

According to Charles Dickens, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is the “shortest short story ever told”. Our Christian identity has been, undoubtedly, shaped by this Gospel passage.

Many of us feel irresistibly drawn to this story of homecoming, I guess, because we can identify, more or less consciously, with one of the characters: the wayward son, who wasted the parental bounty or the righteous son who stays at home, or the father whose love could not be contained. It is a rich story suffused with hope and love.

Throughout his life, the 17th century Dutch painter Rembrandt etched, drew, or painted several scenes from this parable: the departure of the younger son, the high living, the herding of pigs, and especially, on many occasions, the final episode, the return. His “final word” is the monumental *Return of the Prodigal Son* that has been, for more than 250 years, part of the Hermitage collection of art in Saint Petersburg.

Two figures emerge from absolute darkness and capture the viewer’s attention: an elderly man in a great red cloak touches with gentleness the shoulders of a dishevelled boy who

kneels before him. We cannot but be drawn into the painting through the intimacy between these two figures, and the serene, mysterious light enveloping them. When, at the age of about sixty, Rembrandt started to work on this painting, the parable had become a recapitulation of his own life. He was a man worn down by the consequences of the extravagant life he had led as a successful young artist, by his resentments and bitterness. The children he had hoped would bring him joy and comfort in his old age - they were no more. Under his paintbrush, the drama of his life is transfigured into a mysterious event of forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing.

Nearly 40 years ago, the Dutch Catholic priest, theologian and spiritual writer Henri Nouwen had a chance encounter with a reproduction of Rembrandt's painting, that set him out on a long spiritual journey. He even travelled to the Soviet Union in 1986 and sat for days in the Hermitage Museum to drink in the painting – “the painting above all paintings”, as some have called it, a painting that unites humility and magnificence. Over a period of several years, he returned again and again to Rembrandt's work to understand how it illuminated his life.

“I came to see the painting”, Nouwen said, “as the one that contained not only the heart of the story that God wants to tell me, but also the heart of the story that I want to tell to God and to God's people. All of the Gospel is there. All of my life is there.”

At first, Nouwen said, he was drawn to the image of the son kneeling at his father's feet. His shaven head and torn tunic speak of the depths of the young man's despair. His long and humiliating journey, after his reversal of fortune, is told by the soles of his feet. He has left home and family to pursue happiness, yet he was broken by many calamities: dissolute living squandered his resources - or rather “his substance” as a literal translation will have it; severe famine, and social neglect (“no one gave him anything”) morphed him into a non-person.

Yet, in this experience of utter emptiness, by grace, he was still able to say the word with which his entire misadventure began: “Father”.

The gentle weight of his father's hands on the young man's frail shoulders gives him assurance that there is still a place where he belongs. Nouwen perceived in this image a truth that he claimed as his own: whatever he might lose in his life, he was still his Father's child. His coming home meant to walk toward the Father who awaited him with open arms and wanted to tell him that he was accepted and loved for ever.

At another point in his journey, Nouwen was taken by the image of the dutiful brother. Like Nouwen, most of us probably think of ourselves as being like the older son who stayed home, keeping the commandments, doing the right thing, obeying the rules, walking in the narrow way. Therefore, when we read or tell this parable, we tend to focus on the forgiveness and the lavish welcome offered to the younger son and brush off the story of the “loss” of his elder brother, who heaps reproaches upon his father. Through disdain for

his sibling and his self-righteousness, he has left his father's house and is a foreigner dwelling in the far country of contempt. We can ask ourselves, as Nouwen did, how often has our inclination to make judgements in the name of our righteousness, kept us from exercising compassion and forgiveness?

Many viewers see the older brother in the stern looking figure on the right side of the painting, stiff in his resentfulness, engulfed in darkness because of his inner complaint and his refusal to share in his father's joy, that cannot be complete until this older son finds his way home as well. Neither brother sees himself as he truly is: the father's beloved child, belonging, with his sibling, to one family. They both need to be freed from false riches, so as to understand the true riches of the father: those of his unconditional love. Each of them, each of us, has their unique place in the Father's house, one that the Father himself prepared for them.

Later in his life, Nouwen came to see that he was called to become like the father in his extravagant compassion, forgiveness and welcome for each and every one who is lost. The father's unreserved, unlimited love is offered wholly and equally to both his sons. He gives each of them the freedom to be themselves, to undertake the journey they want. But he also knows they need his love, and they need a 'home'. As the poet T. S. Eliot has put it, "the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time" (*The Four Quartets*). To arrive at the father's house means learning that this is a place where love is the only thing that matters.

Standing at the centre of this place is God who says to us: "Child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

Amen.