

4th Sunday of Lent, 27 March 2022

Scriptures: Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Cor. 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3,11-32

Homily: Fr. Ken

One of the most famous paintings of the Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn was completed in 1669. Many art critics consider it the greatest picture ever painted. They call it monumental. It is titled: "The Return of the Prodigal Son". It hangs in the Hermitage Museum, in St. Petersburg, Russia.

I saw the painting myself when I was in Russia many years ago. My meditation on the painting has stayed with me over the decades.

Rembrandt's evocation of spirituality and the parable's message of forgiveness has been considered the height of his art.

In the painting, the son has returned home in a wretched state from travels in which he has wasted his inheritance and fallen into poverty and despair. He kneels before his father in repentance, wishing for forgiveness and a renewed place in the family, having realized that even his father's servants had a better station in life than he. His father receives him with a tender gesture. His hands seem to suggest mothering and fathering at once; the left appears larger and more masculine, set on the son's shoulder, while the right is softer and more receptive in gesture. Standing at the right is the prodigal son's older brother, who crosses his hands in judgment; in the parable he objects to the father's compassion for the sinful son.

Rembrandt was deeply moved by the parable, and spiritually inspired. He interprets the Christian idea of mercy with extraordinary solemnity, as though the painting was his spiritual testament to the world.

Like many of us in the centuries that followed, the Dutch Catholic priest, Fr. Henri Nouwen was also taken by the painting. Fr. Nouwen was also a personal friend of mine since the 1970's until his death in 1996. We often met up in Europe, and also in Nicaragua, and Los Angeles, and had many theological and spiritual conversations together.

Fr. Nouwen was a prolific writer, and after his long spiritual encounter with the Rembrandt painting, wrote a book about it titled: *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, published in 1992.

In his book, Fr. Nouwen shares a quite interesting perspective. He writes about Rembrandt:

"Rembrandt is as much the elder son of the parable as he is the younger. When, during the last years of his life, he painted both sons in *Return of the Prodigal Son*, he had lived a life in which neither the lostness of the younger son nor the lostness of the elder son was alien to him. Both needed healing and forgiveness. Both needed to come home. Both needed the embrace of a forgiving father. But from the story itself, as well as from Rembrandt's painting, it is clear that the hardest conversion to go through, is the conversion of the one who stayed home".

Returning to the parable itself, we find God, the forgiving and merciful parent. God is there, ever-present, ever-welcoming each and all of us.

As we go up and down in life, God remains constant, our center, our focus, our home where we shall always find a welcome.

Throughout their long history, the people of Israel knew well the experience of coming home to God. From the time they were called to follow Moses into the desert and then onward to the land promised them by God, a sense of homecoming urged them on. When they sinned and turned their backs on their Creator and

Redeemer; God did not relent. Time and time again, God's mercy brought them home to healing and forgiveness.

As we heard reported in today's first reading from Joshua, God's mercy was celebrated on the feast of Passover. They remembered the story of their beginnings and praised the God who never ceased calling them home.

This truth is reflected all throughout the sacred texts and especially in those chosen for Lent. During this Lenten season of fasting, prayer, penance, and special attentiveness to the poor and to all those suffering from the current Russian-Ukrainian war, we are shown mercy as we remember the extent of God's love revealed to us in Jesus.

St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Corinthians that through Christ, we and all the world are reconciled to God. All has been made right; all has been made new.

Moreover, those who are blessed with such a gift are thereby charged by God with the ministry of reconciliation: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us".

Lent is indeed the season for making things right with family, friends, and others.

Looking again at the parable of the Prodigal Son, we might sense an invitation to find ourselves within the text of the story itself.

Each of us here can ask ourselves personally, with whom in the parable do we identify ourselves, at this particular time in our life?

Are you the wayward son, whose dreams of a good, happy, and wealthy life evaporated in a pig pen in a foreign country? Now returned home in shame and sorrow, he is disheveled, kneeling before his father. He knows he has dishonored his father and himself. He knows he does not deserve it, but he relies on the

goodness of his father and surrenders himself to his love and mercy.

Or, perhaps you see yourself in the dutiful but resentful elder son? His anger makes him bitter; he refuses to rejoice or share in the celebration because he does not understand his father's mercy and love.

Or, do you see yourself in the person of the father? Any parent can sympathize with his generous man whose child's actions have hurt him. We can sympathize—but can we be as welcoming and as forgiving?

This is the challenge put before us today and every day.

Whether we are the younger son, or the elder son, we need to recognize that truly we all are called by God to become the parent.

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