THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON:
A REFLECTION

Since it was the Prodigal Son that has brought us together, I thought that I would return to that glorious painting by Rembrandt. I want to take this opportunity to reflect with you about what that painting has brought to me, and to countless others and not least, the key that it gives us to the reading of the Rule of St Benedict.

We met, Henri Nouwen and I, in Canada at Daybreak where he was living with the L’Arche community. I was there to suggest some changes that his London publishers were asking him to make to the manuscript of The Return of the Prodigal Son. When we stopped talking he turned to me with that enchanting, somewhat mischievous smile of his, and asked if I would help him to polish his shoes! He was off to lecture – at Harvard (or was it at Yale?). It was so typical of him to turn from his work with L’Arche to speak to a sophisticated and highly intelligent audience of students, for he was always struggling to hold together the apparently contradictory. To live with contradiction is for most of us inescapable. This gives me a further reason why the Rembrandt picture is so significant, for it is something that is addressed with great sensitivity in this painting.

The portrayal by Rembrandt of the Prodigal Son is one that most of us will have seen time and again in many contexts. It was the poster on an office door that had such a profound effect on Henri that he was determined to go to see the original in St Petersburg. The immediate impact on seeing the original in situ is its huge size. I too have had the chance to visit that gallery and to stand there, finding my focus first caught by the feet, which were at the level of my own eyes and then gradually being drawn upwards to the figure of the Father. Henri, for whom it was a pilgrimage, spent time there over two days, finally being able to sit down and to return again. He would listen to the guides, make notes, and assimilate information. Then he looked more deeply, seeing the differences as the light changed. Finally he related it to himself personally, “until I became part of the story”.

There could easily be a danger of letting familiarity and repetition dull our response. But I believe that if we return to it time and time again, at different moments of our lives, with different questions in mind, we shall discover that it contains what is universal, essential to our humanity, whoever we may be. Luther had once called it “the Gospel within the Gospel”, and Henri, echoing him, (consciously or not), tells us that all of the Gospel is there.

Perhaps those unfamiliar with monasticism might not realise just how Gospel based is the Rule of St Benedict, the sixth century foundational text for western monasticism. St Benedict’s desire is to make the values of the Gospel integral to
daily life. As soon as we recognise that the words of the Rule are totally scriptural, we become aware of its deep biblical allusions and resonances. Thus we discover that the opening words “Listen carefully my son to the words of a loving Father” are in fact using two Biblical images.

Each one of us is being addressed as beloved and as prodigal. This is how the Prologue opens, and since it is based on baptismal teaching it is addressed to anyone following Christ by way of their baptismal vows. At the moment of baptism we learn that we are each uniquely loved. We are given the gift of Belovedness, a gift that we must claim, that we must live into – as Henri has told us.

The second image of the Prodigal shows us the journey of the Christian life, the home-coming to the Father. It is a story that we live not only once but time and again throughout our lives. There are three pivotal moments, and it is fascinating to see that they recall the three Benedictine vows- and thus I feel show how those vows are rooted in the human psyche.

The son has squandered all his heritage (and here I would include not only material possessions but talents and skills). The moment of truth comes only as he stops and listens, as he sees with clarity what he has been doing to himself. By this act of listening deeply, in the depths of his innermost being, he hears the voice of God, the Word, and as a result he responds – which is the vow of obedience, which as the Latin reminds us oboedire, means to listen attentively. He then takes action, he turns and returns, the metanoia of repentance which means the sorrow which shows itself in energy, in being ready to change and move forward (the vow of conversatio morum). The final pivotal moment sees the son at home, safely in the embrace of a loving father, who accepts, forgives, with total acceptance, with pre-conditional forgiveness. He comes to the place where he belongs, and where there is no need to escape or to hide, but where he is rooted and grounded in the reality of being present to the presence of God (the vow of stabilitas, stability).

This is the purpose of St Benedict: to bring us home. The prayer at his shrine in the crypt of St Benoit sur Loire at Fleury speaks of the human condition: we have strayed, we have lost our way, and we beg St Benedict, who knows the ways of the heart, to help us to return.

Henri perhaps writes more vividly than many other authors of this sense of alienation. He articulates the sense of looking at the world from the edge, of the need to belong. This rawness in himself must surely have affected the way in which he sat and gazed at the Prodigal Son. Those feet are the point of entry, as it were, into the picture. Immediately we notice that they are different. On the left, the foot is naked, bare, vulnerable; it reminds me of Moses being told to take off his sandals, to put his naked foot on the bare earth, humus, an act of humility, which prefigures the vision of the burning bush. The right foot is shod, ready for the journey ahead, even though the sandal is worn and torn. Then our eyes are
drawn to the hands, for this is where the light falls; the Father’s hands, hands of blessing, hands of love.

Again they are different. The left hand of the Father, which is on our right, is firm and muscular; the fingers spread out strongly, the pressure evident on the shoulders. The other hand is elegant, tender, the fingers held gently together in a way that seems caressing. They tell us much about the importance, the role of touch. Those words of the risen Christ, ‘noli me tangere’, are often misleadingly translated as telling Mary not to touch. But to touch is essential, as we see time and again in the Gospels. But Mary is told not to cling. Loving is setting free. Shortly in the story, the son will be standing upright, ready to accompany his father to the feast as the honoured guest.

We see here enacted two aspects of the relationship between father and son, forgiveness and celebration. Both were foundational aspects as Jean Vanier described it of the L’Arche Community, in that wonderful book Community and Growth. As always he puts his finger on two essential behavioural attitudes. They help the process of bonding, whether between two persons or a group.

What Rembrandt portrays so skilfully is a unified whole, yet one that at the same time contains duality and contradiction. Henri Nouwen was a man of paradox, frequently torn apart by inner conflict, playing different roles, finding himself pulled in different directions. He struggled to be single-minded, seeking the still point in Christ where his life would be anchored. At the end of his time at the Genesee Abbey in upstate New York, where he lived for seven months with a community of Trappist monks, whose lives followed the Rule of St Benedict, he told the abbot and the brothers what the experience had meant to him. He said that by learning to allow the Lord to be in the centre, his life was becoming more simple, more focused, more unified.

Once on a beautiful summer day in August while he was at the Abbey, he described the beauty of the land, the gentle hills, the fields just harvested. He longed to share this moment but wrote that he found that the experience of great beauty always remained mysteriously linked with the experience of great loneliness. He adds that perhaps there was a beauty that he had not seen yet; one that does not create loneliness. I think that at that age, (and he and I are virtually the same age), I might have said the same. But as he gazed at the Rembrandt and describes it, he is able to show us that there is a beauty to be found not in a landscape but as here, in a more human scene: in the face of an old man, and of a young man wearing torn and shabby clothes, kneeling, with damaged feet. Here we see a disfigured beauty, which does not fulfil any of the rules or expectations of conventional beauty. In the depiction of the relationship between the wounded and the compassionate, (something to which Henri dedicated so much of his thought), we are shown something which has never been more urgently needed.
than in today’s world. It can be expressed in art, and in writing. Henri brought the two together most brilliantly. But it calls above all for action.

A Benedictine monk once said that the question which we should all ask ourselves at the end of each day is “Have I today become a more loving person?” St Benedict looked to his followers not for words but for deeds. This is the challenge. In Henri Nouwen we see a man who accepted that challenge.

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