

In the Hands of the Father
Lenten Meditations on the Parable of the Prodigal Son



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Meditation I

“All men are seeking for thee”

It hangs in the Hermitage in what was known then and is known now as St. Petersburg having been acquired by Catherine the Great in 1776, some one hundred and eight or nine years after Rembrandt painted what was probably his last painting before his death in 1669. It is called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, perhaps one of the world's greatest paintings, and the inspiration for Henri Nouwen's thoughtful and reflective meditation on the Gospel parable that is the subject of the painting.

The parable is the well-known parable from the fifteenth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel and is known as *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. Rembrandt's painting captures that intense and intimate moment of the son's return to his father. It is the homecoming of the son. A powerful moment, it both conceals and reveals the larger story. In Luke's Gospel, this parable is the third of three parables that are all about redemption, about being lost and then found: *the parable of the lost sheep*, *the parable of the lost coin*, and *the parable of the lost son*, the prodigal son. If we were to imagine these parables as being depicted in art, they would form a *triptych*, such as are found on many altars in Europe; in short, three panels with the two side panels framing the central panel. That central panel, it seems to me, would *have to be* a depiction of the prodigal son. It is the most intense, the most dynamic and the most compelling of the three parables.

Henri Nouwen's meditation helps us to appreciate the power of the parable. But it is the painting that has inspired his insight into the radical and universal message that the story presents. The homecoming of the Son to the Father is the very nature of the Christian pilgrimage, *the journey of the soul to God*, we might say. The wonder of the painting is the miracle of the parable. We have a God and Father to whom we may return. The painting captures the deep compassion of the Father for the wayward son. The truth of our humanity is ultimately to be found in the embrace of the Father's love, no matter how far and wide we have strayed. Ultimately, we live in the total and unconditional love of the Father.

The Christian pilgrimage of Lent concentrates the whole pageant of the soul's journey to God into the span of forty days. Far from being about heroic deeds of fasting and abstinence, important as such forms of self-denial and self-reflection are, Lent reminds us that such things belong entirely to the motions of God's love in us. It is God's love that impels and completes the soul's journey to God. *“Behold, we go up to Jerusalem,”* Jesus tells us on the Sunday just before the beginning of the Lenten pilgrimage. Crucial to that journeying is our coming to know and understand the divine love which seeks our good, the divine love which suffers the outrageous things that sinful humanity

inflicts upon him in the passion and death of Jesus Christ, the divine love which overcomes the disorders of our loves in the glory of his Resurrection.

Nouwen's meditation has three parts; the younger son, the elder son and the father. All three moments which belong to the parable are also present in the painting. Yet the painting focuses on the moment of the return of the son.

The idea of return implies the leaving of the son. The significance of that leaving is, perhaps, best captured in the word, prodigal. We associate that word with being wasteful of the riches that have been given to us and with the idea of squandering or throwing away what we have been given, foolishly and irresponsibly. As the King James Bible so memorably puts it, the younger son *"took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living."* Other translations such as the Revised Standard Version say that *"he squandered his property in loose living."* The point is clear.

But Nouwen, quoting Kenneth Bailey, a biblical scholar, notes the even more radical nature of this wastefulness. It implies a complete rejection of all that belongs to his Father and a rejection of the Father as well, a complete repudiation of the home, the place of identity in love. The actions of the prodigal son are a radical rejection of the Father's love.

What makes the return possible is the Father's love. The son in that far country having wasted everything and having been reduced to servitude and destitution is a very poor, poor man. But *"he came to himself"* in that far country and recalls his Father's home. *"I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before you, and am no more worthy to be called your son: make me as one of your hired servants."* It is a beautiful moment that reflects upon the nature of his radical rejection of the Father in his leaving and the sense of having thrown away his Sonship. *"I am no longer worthy to be called your son."*

But what impels this moment of repentance is something greater. It is actually the Father's love. In the meaning of the parable and this is suggested in the power of the painting, we contemplate the unconditional and unwavering nature of the divine love, the boundless compassion of God without which there can be no return. It is that divine love that means as well the return of the son as a son and not simply as a servant. His repentance captures exactly the meaning of his radical rejection of the Father's love but the Father's love is greater than our destructive folly and denial of that love. *"He came to himself"* but we really only truly come to ourselves when we return to the Father's embrace, the very thing that Rembrandt has captured in his painting.

On this eve of Ember Wednesday in Lent, we are reminded of the significance and the importance of *"missionary work in our own country."* It seems to me that we often overlook how our parishes in all of their struggles are really missions of the divine love.

We have a God to whom we can return. The divine love compels us. Our parishes are to be those places where all souls can find the truth which they truly seek despite all our blindnesses and our follies. *"All men are seeking after thee,"* the disciples say to Jesus, saying in a way, more than they know. What we seek is the homeland of the soul. It is found in the Father's love. And we shall see, too, in the various commentaries on this parable over the centuries, how the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is understood to have gone into the far country of human sinfulness that he might bring us to ourselves in the knowledge of the Father's love which underlies the very meaning of his passion. In every way we journey to God with God only to discover that our home is always with God. We are embraced in the Father's love.

"All men are seeking for thee"

*Eve of Ember Wednesday
The Prodigal Son I
February 28th, 2012*

Meditation II

*“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself,
and take up his cross and follow me”*

Matthew’s familiar words are complemented by Peter’s words from his First Epistle, “if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God in this name.” These scriptural passages are appointed to be read at the commemoration of a martyr; they speak of the meaning of our Christian identity and about the nature of the Christian pilgrimage. Tonight, in the week of *The Second Sunday in Lent*, we commemorate Perpetua and her Companions, third century martyrs. “Another lives in me,” Perpetua is reported to have said. It is another marvelous line that captures so much of the Christian witness and identity.

Somehow these readings also speak directly to our Lenten pilgrimage and connect to our meditation on the Parable of the Prodigal Son by way of Henri Nouwen’s reflection on Rembrandt’s 1668 painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Throughout the centuries of Christian thought, that parable has been the occasion of many commentaries. Rembrandt’s painting, we might say, is itself a kind of commentary on the parable and its significance with respect to the over-arching themes of repentance and reconciliation, themes which are specific as well to the season of Lent.

Self-denial and suffering are features of Lent that draw us into the mystery of Christ’s passion, into the mystery of human redemption accomplished through the reconciliation between God and Man in Jesus Christ. The parable, too, in the rich commentary tradition speaks to those themes explicitly.

We do not read the Scriptures in a vacuum. We read them as belonging to an interpretative community. The Parable of the Prodigal Son has been read liturgically at certain times of the Christian year in the different ecclesiastical traditions of the wider Church. It is read in our Anglican tradition at Morning Prayer in Year One of the two-year cycle of Office readings on *The Second Sunday in Lent*, for instance. In the traditions of the churches of Eastern Orthodoxy, there is the Sunday of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in the pre-Lenten season which gives high prominence to this parable as preparing us for Great Lent.

The consequence of this is that there is a rich commentary tradition among what are commonly called the Fathers of the Church, meaning the Patristic period, comprising roughly the first six centuries of the Christian faith. Archbishop Chrysostomos, a contemporary Orthodox archbishop, notes that Henri Nouwen’s meditation on the Prodigal Son by way of Rembrandt’s painting reflects the patristic understanding of the parable even if there are no explicit references to the commentary tradition of the

Fathers in that work. Our interest tonight will be to highlight a few of the comments of the Fathers about the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The Patristic Period is of great significance for our understanding of the Christian faith. Through the cauldron of controversy, confusion and conflict, the Fathers worked out two things which are of great significance for the Christian understanding. They settled on the Canon of Scripture – the texts that comprise what we ordinarily call the Bible – and they determined what the essential features of Christian belief are in the Creeds and the further explication of the creeds through the Great Councils. These two developments, Scripture and Creed, go together.

Their approach to the interpretation of Scripture is rich and varied but, in general, it is always about seeing patterns and connections that relate to the idea of the unity of Scripture and to the creedal principles of the Faith. Much of the Father's observations may seem strange and arbitrary to us because of their use of allegory and symbolism but underlying this tendency is a strong sense of the Scriptures as having a purpose for us and as containing rich layers of meaning. It means a kind of focus on each detail as conveying a deeper meaning, deeper meanings, however, which usually relate directly to the creedal principles of the Christian Faith.

In the commentary tradition of the Fathers on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, there is an emphasis on the theme of the return, recognizing the son as *"an exile and a fugitive from the life led under the Father"* as Clement of Alexandria puts it, and who *"has arisen and come to his Father"*. The theme of the lost and found emphasizes the sense of joy, the greater joy that belongs to redemption, to our being gathered back into the Father's love, a love which we have squandered and denied but which ever remains as something greater than all our follies. Thus, Clement and others will highlight the theme of the return, albeit in different ways than Rembrandt's painting.

Following upon the preceding two parables, the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin, the Fathers will emphasise the theme of rejoicing through the redemption of the lost. This means a focus on the details of the return in such things as the imagery of clothing. As Clement, for example, and he is followed in this by many others, the clothing the Father provides for the son who has returned is rich in symbolism. The best robe is *"the robe of immortality"*, the ring is *"a royal signet and a divine seal"*, the shoes are not *"the shoes of the sinful soul"* but the shoes which the Father bids the servant give to the repentant son *"are buoyant, and ascending, and waft to heaven,"* shoes that lead us to heaven. This is very different from the painting which shows us the shoes of the son who kneels before his father in his rags and ruined shoes and with his soles scarred; he is a very poor man, indeed. But in the reconciling love of the Father he is raised into the real truth of his being as the Father's son.

The fatted calf that is killed is likened to the sacrificial lamb, not literally as Clement says, but to make the connection in the parable to Christ's sacrifice and to our sacramental life in Christ. "*For He,*" meaning Christ, "*is both flesh and bread, and has given Himself as both to us to be eaten.*" In this reading of the Parable we see the creedal themes of redemption and the sacramental application of those themes. We, too, come to the altar just as the Son returns to the Father, embraced in the Father's love through the sacrifice of the heavenly Son who has gone into the distant land of human sin and death for us. Ambrose of Milan reminds us that "*we were also in a distant land,*" the land of "*the shadow of death,*" but now we live "*in the shadow of Christ,*" who is our light.

Augustine remarks that the "*best robe is the dignity which Adam lost; the servants who bring it are the preachers of reconciliation.*" That theme of reconciliation is a strong feature of Nouwen's meditation, too. What he sees in the image of the Father's embrace of the Son is the reconciling love that belongs to the deep compassion of God for us. Such is the Patristic view as well. Everything is resolved in the compassion of the Father.

But the commentary tradition also reflects on another aspect of the parable reflected in the painting as well, namely, the elder son. Here some of the older commentary tradition challenges us. Tertullian, for instance, sees in the elder brother "*the Jews who envied the Christians for their 'reconciliation' with God the Father*". That sense of distinction and division between Christians and Jews may trouble us but for the Fathers it was an inescapable feature of their understanding that Christianity comes out of Judaism and therefore entails a criticism of certain aspects of Judaism. Yet the theme here also turns to something that belongs to the spiritual psychology of the soul, to the idea of envy, which will become one of the seven deadly sins and which wreaks such havoc in our lives and in our relations with one another. Ambrose, too, will draw the parallel between "*the envy of the elder brother for the wayward son*" and envy of the Jews for Christians.

The Gospel for *The Second Sunday in Lent*, of course, also presents us with a critique of one side of the Jewish understanding, the claim to a special relationship with God which excludes others rather than being for the sake of all. That is, I think, part and parcel of the difficult but amazing dialogue between Jesus and the Canaanite women. He is challenging the disciples and through them, Israel, precisely about the divine love that provides for all. Jesus acknowledges her words, "*truth, Lord, yet the little dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table,*" as words of "*great faith.*"

The Patristic emphasis on the theme of reconciliation means that the Parable is also seen in relation to the other two parables which precede it. Ambrose captures this best, I think. He writes:

St. Luke has given three parables successively; the sheep which was lost and found, the piece of silver which was lost and found, the son who was dead and came to life

again (note the explicitly creedal interpretation), in order that invited by a threefold remedy, we might heal our wounds. Christ as the Shepherd bears you on His own body, the Church as the woman seeks for thee, God as the Father receives you, the first, pity, the second, intercession, the third, reconciliation.

That theme of reconciliation embraces the elder son as well for the divine love seeks to overcome all of the forms of our alienation and separation from one another by recalling us to the Father's love, reminding us that we dwell in the Father's love always. "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." We forget this at our peril and when we forget it we are lost and dangerous in our envy. "It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and now is found." There is that idea of the greater joy for all in the return of the sinner, the return of the prodigal son.

The return depends on the extravagant and compassion love of the Father, a love which is total and unconditional. The challenge of our lives is to live in that love. It belongs to our witness and to our life. "Another lives in me", Perpetua remarks. And that can only happen through self-denial and sacrifice, through the ways in which the life of Christ lives in us. Lent sets before us the pilgrimage of love; it is the way of the passion of Christ.

*"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself,
and take up his cross and follow me"*

*Commemoration of St. Perpetua & Companions
The Prodigal Son II
March 6th, 2012*

Meditation III

“Blessed are those servants, whom their lord when he cometh shall find watching.”

It is commonly called *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. Rembrandt’s painting is called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Henri Nouwen’s book bears the same title, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, but provides as a subtitle, *“A Story of Homecoming”*. The missing indefinite or definite article before *homecoming* is telling. Why? Because the parable is very explicit. *“A certain man had two sons.”* There is more than one leaving and therefore the possibility of more than one homecoming. In some sense the parable is universal; it is about the homecoming of our humanity which is, in some sense, too, about our abiding in the compassionate love of the Father as Bernard of Clairvaux’s Lenten sermons on *Qui habitat*, (Psalm 91, Psalm 90 in the Vulgate) suggest. *“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide under the protection of the God of heaven.”*

Two sons. We forget that the dynamic of the story is not just with respect to the younger son but also includes the elder son. Such is the subtlety and complexity of the parable, the commentary tradition upon it, and Rembrandt’s painting, itself a kind of commentary. And in very intriguing ways.

Rembrandt’s painting focuses, to be sure, on the return of the prodigal son but that is not the actual center of the painting. The iconic scene of the son’s embrace by the Father is off-center, to the left in the painting, actually. To the right is the elder son, his face illumined, like the scene of the embrace of Father and younger son, but the center of the painting is the space between the Father’s embrace of the younger son, and the stern and critical gaze, it is fair to say, of the elder son. Unlike the prodigal son, ironically, the face of the elder son and brother is visible.

The parable is really the parable of two lost sons as Nouwen suggests. In this he is hardly unique. The interpretation of Scripture does not happen in a vacuum. And among the more intriguing interpretations of the parable are those that deal with the elder son. It seems that you don’t have to go away to be lost. The distance between the Father’s embrace of the younger son and the elder brother’s gaze is most telling.

As a parable of the lost and the found, a parable of human redemption, it has to deal with the more complex and less explicit dynamics of the elder son, too. He is the one who stayed, it seems, the one who was a faithful son, it seems, the one who never envisioned being freed of the Father at all, it seems, altogether unlike the younger son. And yet, he, too, is a lost son and in ways that are almost more disturbing and more disquieting. The commentary tradition finds ways to consider the elder son in relation to the younger son and reflects, although often rather obliquely, in my view, on the rich seam of biblical narrative that deals precisely with sibling rivalry. Nothing could be

more a salient feature of the Pentateuch and beyond. What is *The Book of Genesis* but a recurring refrain of sibling rivalry and tension, of brother against brother? Cain and Abel, Abram and Laban, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers? "*Your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground,*" God says to Cain. The blood of brothers. Indeed.

Renbrandt's painting captures the spirit though not the letter of the parable. We have already seen how the younger son, finding himself lost to himself in the land of dissimilitude, *the land of unlikeness*, comes to himself and returns to the Father, not as son in his own mind, but as servant, having watched and noted, we must say, that the conditions of the servants in his Father's house were far better than the conditions of indifference and neglect as a swineherd in someone else's service. There is just the hint of a difference between cultures in the way in which servants are regarded.

In principle, it has to be said, the idea of slaves is contrary to the understanding of our humanity for Jews, for Christians and for Muslims. Not that there are not, historically, a multitude of exceptions to the rule, but without this fundamental insight one will not be able to grasp the enormity of the modern form of slavery, slavery as a form of commerce rather than conquest, that involves all the monotheistic religions in a hideous contradiction of their fundamental sense of the human person as being made in the image of God, whether that God is Yahweh, the Trinity or Allah.

The commentary tradition of the Patristic and Medieval periods sees the younger son's journey into a far country as a kind of alienation and forgetfulness of self. Following Augustine (354-430), the far country is "*the land of unlikeness,*" of dissimilitude, "*a strange land*" as Isaac of Stella (c.1100-c.1169) puts it. He makes the connection to the question that God puts to Adam after the Fall, "*Where art thou?*" As this twelfth century Cistercian preacher puts it, "*Still in the shadows perhaps, so that you cannot see yourself?*" He goes on to make the argument that only by turning inward can you begin to discover your wretchedness and your need for God's illuminating, purifying and perfecting grace.

There are, as it turns out, a multitude of ways to lose ourselves. Augustine's *land of unlikeness* is not a geographical entity so much as a psychological and theological reality. And in that sense, we can begin to see that the elder son who never physically left his Father's home is nonetheless still lost. He separates himself and stands at a remove from his Father's embrace of the wayward younger son. He, too, alienates himself and in some sense his form of separation is darker and deeper. It arises from envy and jealousy, from the forms of pride which are always about wanting more attention to be paid to ourselves. It is invidious, we might say, and it arises from comparisons in which we persuade ourselves that we have been injured, neglected and ignored, on the one hand, and so refuse to rejoice with others, on the other hand.

In the parable, the elder son comes to the party *after* the event of the reconciliation. In Rembrandt's painting, he is presented as the primary observer. He keeps his distance from the emotional impact of the event but it is clear from the parable and from the painting as commentary on the parable that he is anything but a detached observer. He is subjectively involved, we might say. He is anything but disinterested.

In the parable, the servants first explain to him what has transpired. They do so full of a kind of joy themselves at the return of the younger son. But Luke is very clear about the elder son's reaction. "*He was angry and would not go in.*" He rejects, in other words, the Father's love for his brother. Here is a key point. Just as the Father went out to meet his younger son, the returning son, so here the Father goes out to beg his elder son, the resentful son, to come in. Always the Father seeks to reconcile and restore. He hears the complaint of the elder son; his complaint is against the younger son, the wastrel, and, by extension, against the mercy of the Father.

The commentary tradition, especially in the monasteries of the medieval world, is quite astute and profoundly observant about this reality. They understand the darker dimensions of the human soul, especially the dangers that arise from self-righteousness and self-esteem. In a way, there is the awareness that works-righteousness, to use a later term from the reformation, is indeed deadly and results in a kind of denial of the greater power and truth of God's grace. The elder son feels hard done by because of the Father's compassion. He resents the good that has been granted to his brother. In the mind of the elder son, the younger son is no longer his brother, but neither is his father his father. In rejecting the one, he rejects the other. He is, unwittingly and yet willingly, in *the land of unlikeness*.

The great Cistercian preacher, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), in one of his Meditations *On the Song of Songs*, the great love-poem of the Jewish Scriptures, remarks that "*the elder brother who returned from the field is the type of that old earthly-minded race who are taught to labor for an earthly heritage, and worn with care groan with furrowed brow under the heavy yoke of the law, bearing the burden and the heat of the day,*" thereby connecting this parable with the parable of the workers in the vineyard. "*He it is, I say,*" says Bernard, "*who even now stands outside because he has no understanding, and refuses to enter the house of feasting, even when invited by his father; so he still defrauds himself of his share in the music and the dancing, and the fatted calf. Unhappy man, refusing to find out how good and pleasant it is for brothers to live in unity!*" For brothers to live in unity, as Psalm 133 (Ps. 132 in the Vulgate) suggests, means to acknowledge the Father they have in common. One cannot help but notice that Bernard here seems to deny the possibility of the return of the elder son. The parable itself says nothing.

Following upon one of the tropes from the Fathers, Bernard goes on to suggest another level of interpretation. "*This must be said to show the difference between the character of the Church and of the synagogue, so the blindness of the one may be distinguished from the insight*

of the other, and the blessedness of the one may stand in clear contrast to the unhappy foolishness of the other." The contrast between Church and Synagogue was a Medieval commonplace that reflects the Patristic view of the connections and distinctions between Jews and Christians.

We may feel somewhat uncomfortable with that observation but it is important to recall that the parable itself is set within the context of criticism and division between Jesus and the Scribes and Pharisees. This parable, as we have had occasion to remark, is one of three about being lost and found, about redemption and reconciliation. The whole 15th chapter begins precisely with a scene of division and tension. The context is one in which the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying about Jesus that "*this man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.*" In the face of their condemnatory criticism, Jesus tells the three parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost sons.

We have had occasion to remark on the multi-layered approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures. Dante (1265-1321), the great poet-theologian of the Medieval world, provides a succinct summary of what one might call the standard medieval approach as derived from the Fathers. He is writing to his patron, Can Grande della Scala about his great poetic summa, the *Commedia*, which will later be known as the Divine Comedy, explaining how the work is to be read.

The meaning of this work is not simple ... for we obtain one meaning from the letter of it, and another from that which the letter signifies; and the first is called literal, but the other allegorical or mystical. And to make this matter of treatment clearer, it may be studied in the verse: "When Israel came out of Egypt and the House of Jacob from among the strange people, Judah was his sanctuary and Israel his dominion" [Ps. 114. 1,2]. For if we regard the letter alone, what is set before us is the exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt in the days of Moses; if the allegory, our redemption wrought by Christ; if the moral sense, we are shown the conversion of the soul from the grief and wretchedness of sin to the state of grace; if the anagogical, we are shown the departure of the holy soul from the thralldom of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory. And although these mystical meanings are called by various names, they may all be called in general allegorical, since they differ from the literal and historical. (Dante, *Epistle to Can Grande*).

Dante goes on to explain how this interpretative approach works in relation to his great classic of the spiritual life. As Dante himself acknowledges, there are different names and different ways of understanding the multi-layered approach to the reading of Scripture. For the most part, as we have tried to suggest, this approach stands under the creedal principles of the Christian Faith and is measured by those saving truths.

With respect to the elder son, there are a number of intriguing commentaries, but perhaps the most intriguing of all is that of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), the twelfth century Abbess whose sermons or expositions on this Parable have become the focus of more recent scholarship. Set within the context of the monastic communities of Medieval Europe, the figure of the elder son brings out the kinds of questions about the virtues and the vices that affect all human communities. As Beverley Mayne Kienzle observes about this approach, *“Hildegard’s lesson fits into monastic life and the tensions over observance of the Rule and discipline of transgressions. Indeed her observations on human behavior – jealousy, blaming God’s [sic] for one’s faults, making a new start in life – apply to all human conditions”*. While preserving the literary and dare one say, literal meaning of the parable, Kienzle suggests that *“Hildegard preserves the dramatic structure and tension of the Parable but she enhances it with the introduction of the vices and the virtues, their alliances with the character and the relevance of the drama to monastic life”*.¹

There is another drama, a more interior drama than the drama of the younger son whose actions are so much more visible and evident. The other drama has to do with those within a community of faith and about whether they truly *“dwell under the shelter of the Most High”* or have separated themselves from its truth and meaning.

Bernard of Clairvaux puts it this way. *“My fear, brothers, is that among us there may be someone who is not dwelling in the shelter of the Most High, but trusting in his strength and in the abundance of his riches. Possibly someone who is zealous and much given to watching, fasting, and labours and other such things, but who thinks that he has long since amassed a whole wealth of merits and, trusting in this, has grown less than careful about the fear of God.”* Bernard makes the strong point that *“without Him [namely, God], we cannot hold or preserve what we have received from Him.”* He goes on to talk about *“some who have lost hope”*; some because they focus entirely on their own weakness, others whose hope is vain *“because they flatter themselves in the hope of his mercy so much that they neglect to mend their sinful ways”*. As Bernard suggests, *“the first dwells in his merits, the second in his woes, and third in his vices”*.² It is a nice summary of the kinds of problems that belong to every community, certainly in every parish! And we can see how the elder son in the parable brings out this kind of dilemma, the dilemma of the soul who stays at least outwardly in his Father’s house but fails to recognize in different ways that it is all about grace, the grace of God that keeps us in the Father’s love and joy.

Hildegard provides a twofold exegesis of the Parable in a series of addresses or expositions to her monastic community. The first is about *“the drama of the individual soul*

¹ All the references to Hildegard are drawn from Beverley Mayne Kienzle’s article, “Hildegard of Bingen’s Expositiones evangeliorum and Her Exegesis of the Parable of the Prodigal Son,” in *“Im Angesicht Gottes suche der Mensch sich selbst”*. Hildegard von Bingen 1098-1998. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001, pp. 299-324.

² *Lenten Sermons on the Psalm ‘He Who Dwells’*, Sermon One in Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on Conversion*, Cistercian Fathers Series, No. 25.

who falls away from God, slips into vices, but later returns to God" (Kienzle, Hildegard). The second is about *"the drama of salvation history where humanity sins, is expelled from Paradise, then receives the law, the prophets, and finally the Saviour bringing redemption"* (Kienzle, Hildegard). Both forms of exegesis emphasize the theme of return in terms of repentance, redemption, and rebirth.

The story of the younger son is not just about being lost and found but as the parable itself suggests, it is also about death and resurrection and the joy that belongs to the idea of the fullness of life. What the younger son discovered through his dissolute ways was the exact opposite of the fullness of life. He only comes back to life by returning to God.

With the elder son, on the first form of interpretation, there is a kind of delicacy of expression, a wanting to affirm the rightness of those who remain, in some sense, within the community of the Father's love and yet... and yet. That is the crux of the matter. Hildegard emphasizes the things that are right about the elder son, remaining within the *"mansion of virtues,"* as she puts it, the exact opposite of *"Malice's villa"* where the younger brother had gone. She sees the elder son as astonished at the Father's action, namely, *"that in accepting the younger brother, God made so much good from so much evil"* and then goes on to point out the fault of the elder son. *"The younger son, in his view, did not have the necessary penitence so that there would be joy over his as over one sinner,"* echoing the preceding parables (Kienzle, Hildegard). In short, Hildegard is addressing the delicate business of jealousies and resentments that arise in the community but also affirming the salient point that in one way or another we feel a kind of sympathy for the elder brother. The return, after all, cannot be cheap grace. Something has to be at work in us, indeed a necessary penitence, necessary but entirely dependent on the grace of God's redemption of our humanity.

The parable, of course, has shown what is at work in the mind of the younger son. He came to himself but not by presuming upon his status as son any longer. We have been given to see this but the elder son hasn't, except in Rembrandt's painting which, in making him an observer of the exact moment of the return, brings out the deeper darkness of the human soul in its capacity for resentment and envy.

Hildegard goes on to take some care in explaining the logic of the greater power of good over evil, suggesting that in the return of the prodigal son, everyone benefits because when *"evil knowledge returns to the good, all good things of the Father are praised, and magnified in all creation"* (Kienzle, Hildegard). In a very real sense, there is the greater testimony of the compassionate goodness of God in the overcoming of evil. This is part and parcel of the Lenten journey, part and parcel of the Christian faith and belongs precisely to the point about their being *"joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth"* and *"joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth"* as stated in the two preceding parables.

There is, as well, another ironic remark that is often overlooked, namely, the idea that the joy is greater, *"more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance."* I say ironic because who, after all, can claim to be completely just and in no need of repentance? But Jesus' remark is pointed directly at his accusers, the Pharisees and the Scribes who murmur and take exception to his *"receiving sinners and eating with them."* In other words, it is a strong critique of our human presumption to self-righteousness, a check to our judgmentalism of others, too.

Hildegard's second form of exegesis is more intriguing and somewhat unique. As Beverley Kienzle suggests, she may have got it from Origen (c.184-c.254), but it has to do with a larger treatment of salvation history. The two sons are respectively types; the elder represents the angels, the younger son, humanity. While recognizing the influence of Origen on Patristic and Medieval exegesis, it seems to me there is another influence at work here too, namely the theology of Anselm (c.1033-1109) on the question of human redemption.

Anselm locates the dynamic of human redemption in the larger context of the *justitia dei*, the justice of God. Redemption is about restoring the divine justice of creation; the fallen angels are replaced by humanity restored to the fullness of life which is heaven. In this view of things there is again a sense of the greater goodness of God at work in redemption, a redemption which emphasizes as well the material and corporeal aspects of our humanity and thereby avoids the dangers of the gnostic separation of matter and spirit. In this view of things, redemption happens because repentance is possible, indeed, necessary for us in our taking a hold of the redemptive work of Christ, the Incarnate Son. The angels are spiritual creatures who are understood to have a role as messengers and agents of the divine will. In Hildegard's exposition, *"God sent Gabriel to announce Christ's conception to Mary. The angel's greeting and the Holy Spirit's coming over Mary corresponds to the father of the parable's greeting and embrace of his son. The father's kiss of the son represents the birth of Jesus, the high point or climax of the drama"* (Kienzle, Hildegard). Once again, one can see the creedal principles at work in the exegesis.

But what about the elder son in this interpretation? The angels are spiritual creatures, to be sure, and therefore belong to the spiritual fellowship of the Church. But the angels have no need of repentance; their fall or their adherence is absolute and eternal. They are sempiternal, outside time. What Hildegard alludes to is the theme of the jealous angels but without falling into the gnostic trap of thinking that the material world is evil and nothing worth. They question, too, all the fuss and bother that is being made by the Father over the return of the younger son. Such are the fallen angels whom Christ casts out.

Hildegard's exegesis seeks to uphold the necessity of repentance at the same time as highlighting the unity of the spiritual community and the respective and complementary roles that angels and men have together as dwellers both in the same

house of God, the one above, the other below stairs, to use a seventeenth century analogy. The angels have a critical role with respect to the *justitia dei*, to the justice of the whole of creation redeemed. The angels play a major part in the unfolding of redemption as liturgically expressed in the logic of the Christian year going from Incarnation to Passion and Resurrection and then to Pentecost. The good angels are defined by what they cling to and adore; namely the superlative goodness of God. This, too, is the whole purpose and meaning of our spiritual lives in community.

In the parable, we are not given to see the return of the elder son. We are only made aware of the Father's love who goes out to him even as he ran out to embrace the younger son. The Father's words convict us of the Father's love. They challenge us to remain in that love by rejoicing in the return of the younger son. *"It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; was lost, and is found."* It was fitting. That idea of the congruence of things is a large part of the theological mindset of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and belongs to this symbolical and creedal way of reading the Scriptures. It helps us, I hope, to appreciate the Father's love and to remind us that we abide in his love. It encourages us, too, perhaps to hope for the return of the elder son, to his being reconciled both to his Father and his brother.

The possibility of return requires our watching and looking upon that love, like Cuthbert, missionary and the Bishop of Lindisfarne (c. 634-687), whom we commemorate this evening. He is one of the most attractive of the early English saints. A figure of the seventh century, he, too, like Bernard and Hildegard after him, was no stranger to the spiritual vices that infect and destroy spiritual communities. To be recalled to the goodness of God as something which we have to seek and want constantly and to be reminded of the spiritual necessity of repentance is the task of the Church in her proclamation of the Gospel through Word and Sacrament. It is about our *"dwell[ing] in the shelter of the Most High"*. But, only if we are watching, rather than judging; only if we recognize that *"without [God], we cannot hold or preserve what we have received from Him (Bernard)"*. Ultimately, we pray for the return of the elder son and so for ourselves.

"Blessed are those servants, whom their lord when he cometh shall find watching."

*Commemoration of St. Cuthbert
The Prodigal Son III
March 20th, 2012*

Meditation IV

“Be it unto me according to thy word”

The Feast of the Annunciation of Mary, more often than not, falls within the Lenten season and, indeed, often within *Passiontide*, as it does this year. Mary’s word to the angel Gabriel is, of course, Mary’s great ‘yes’ to God and reminds us of an important feature of the Christian faith. It is *all God’s grace*, we might say, but it also *all about us*, about our response and embrace of God’s grace and mercy. In a way, Mary’s *fiat mihi* is equally the measure of our Lenten journeying. It is altogether about our active and attentive acquiescence to God’s will and purpose for our humanity. Lent is the divine project for the renovation of our humanity, wounded and broken by sin, restored and renewed by grace.

Mary plays an altogether crucial role in that project. She is not only the Mother of God, the *theotokos*, as orthodox Christianity insists, the one through whom the Son of God becomes the Son of Man, becomes fully human while remaining fully divine, she is also the one who “*mothers each new grace*” in us, as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it. She holds “*high motherhood/towards all our ghostly good/ And plays in grace her part/About man’s beating heart.*” Lovely lines, I think, and ones which speak to our Lenten endeavours to ponder the mystery of Christ’s *Parable of the Prodigal Son*, perhaps better called *the Parable of the Two Lost Sons*, and to ponder that mystery, in part, through Henri Nouwen’s prayerful meditation upon the Parable and its artistic representation by Rembrandt in what is probably the last and, perhaps, greatest painting of Rembrandt, perhaps one of the greatest paintings ever, his *Return of the Prodigal Son*. As Nouwen suggests in his subtitle, it is *the Story of Homecoming*, the homecoming which speaks to all our souls.

We have had occasion to consider the two sons. There is a sense in which our attention is drawn, first, to the younger son and, then, to the elder son but what holds those moments together, what unites every moment in the parable itself, is something other than the two sons; it is the Father. More precisely, it is the love of the Father. In thinking about each of the sons we can hardly ignore the role and figure of the Father, to be sure. But our task tonight is to ponder the mystery of the love of the Father. It may seem paradoxical, but in so doing we are also, I think, pondering the mystery of the Mother of God, the one who embodies the very truth of our humanity considered simply in itself in terms of the true meaning of our life with God. “*Behold the handmaid of the Lord,*” Mary says. We behold her who says, “*Be it unto me according to thy word.*”

The younger son in returning no longer even presumes upon his sonship. The elder son in the parable can no longer even speak of his brother as his brother but only as “*this thy son*”. And yet, it is the Father’s love which embraces both the returning son of

repentance as well as the resentful son of duty. The Father's love calls them both back to home. There can be no home without the Mother, too, I would suggest.

The preoccupations about gender have created a whole lot of *sturm und drang* for contemporary Christianity, especially the way the dignity of our humanity, as understood in the pageant of human redemption, has become dominated by the human rights agenda. Because the parable seems to be about a father and two sons, it might seem that mothers and daughters and women in general are somehow left out of the picture. This misses the point, it seems to me, and overburdens the reading of Scripture with a contemporary concern which gets in the way of the profounder meaning and teaching of the parable which speaks intentionally to the whole of our humanity. The parable is not about rights and privileges, except perhaps in the person of the elder son, so much as it is about the deeper justice of God which is love.

The parable is closely associated with the two preceding parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. The parable of the lost coin is about the *diligence* of the woman, to use the Latin word for the kind of serious love and committed love that is shown in the actions of the woman who *seeks diligently* for the one lost coin. She is in her house, to be sure, but then the Father, too, is seen in conjunction with the home. The deeper point is that the diligence of the woman is the same kind of love as the Father's love which embraces the younger son and entreats the elder son; the same kind of love, too, signified in the shepherd's seeking the one lost sheep without which the homeland of the spirit is somehow incomplete. The joy in each of these three intertwined parables, it seems to me, is both about the return of the lost but also about the community that is incomplete without the return of the sheep, the coin and the son(s).

It is that greater sense of all things finding their truth and unity in the divine compassion that makes the Father's love so profound and so important. The father of the parable is our heavenly Father; there is scarcely a commentary that does not see that as a central aspect of the parable; its overarching doctrinal and symbolical idea, if you will.

For the doctrinal point is important. In the Christian understanding of things, God is the Blessed Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, the sacred names which transcend human associations and connotations while yet being expressed through them. *The Female Glory*, to use a phrase from the title of Anthony Stafford's remarkable 17th century devotional treatise, and one which is soundly doctrinal and creedal, is about humanity's relationship to God which is nowhere signified more fully than in Mary, the blessed Mother of God.

The parable is, after all, just that, a parable, a story told for a purpose, a story with a moral and spiritual message. It is not about a literal and historical event. "A certain man had two sons," it begins. The point of the story is about the Father's love in which we

find the true meaning of our lives as sons and daughters, as children of the Most High. The Father's love is all-encompassing and unconditional. It is, we might say, extravagant in its generosity and sincerity. The Father's love is truly prodigal.

Rembrandt's painting captures the moment of the Father's embrace of the younger son while the elder son looks on *"askance and strangely"* (Shakespeare, *Sonnet CX*). It is that moment of embrace that has so captured the mind of Henri Nouwen. The younger son is on his knees, a suppliant before the Father; he is, as we have suggested, a very poor man. His life has been turned upside down because of his folly in running away from the Father and, in effect, denying his own identity as his Father's son. He has come to himself in that far away country. A beautiful moment, it marks a kind of awakening in the son. He returns but not upon the presumption of a worthy son but merely as a servant. There is no presumption in him any longer. That has been knocked out of him a long time ago. He is completely impoverished, lacking absolutely everything. He is poor and destitute.

Yet there he is in the painting not just kneeling before the Father but embraced by the Father whose two hands are placed upon his right shoulder and back. It is the hands that are especially arresting.

The scene recalls, to my mind, Isaac's blessing of Jacob. That story, too, is a story about brothers: Esau, the elder son; and Jacob, the younger son. *"Isaac was old and his eyes were dim, so that he could not see"* (Genesis 27.1). He calls Esau, his eldest son and bids him go hunting and catch some game, (the King James Bible rather quaintly says *"some venison"*) that he may eat and, as he says, *"that my soul may bless thee before I die"* (Gen. 27.7).

Rebekah, the mother of Jacob, overhears Isaac and quickly sets Jacob in motion with her help to prepare a savoury meal for Isaac so that Jacob will receive the blessing before Isaac dies. Jacob recognizes that there is only one problem. *"Behold, Esau my brother is an hairy man, and I am a smooth man"* (Gen. 27. 11). How can he disguise himself? She has him put on Esau's *"goodly raiment"* (Gen. 27.15) and, more importantly, she puts *"the skins of the kids of goats upon his hands and upon the smooth of his neck"* (Gen. 27.16). And so Jacob in disguise comes before his Father Isaac to steal the blessing of the first-born. The scene is exquisitely presented to us.

And Jacob went near unto Isaac his father; and he felt him, and said, The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau. And he discerned him not, because his hands were hairy, as his brother Esau's hands: so he blessed him. (Gen. 27. 23)

Jacob has effectively stolen his brother's blessing, the father's blessing of the first-born. He has done so with guile, with treachery and deceit. As Esau will say with great bitterness, *"Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took*

away my birthright [an earlier story where Esau sold his birthright for a mess of pottage]; and behold, now he has taken away my blessing" (Gen. 27.36). But the blessing that Isaac has conferred cannot be revoked; Jacob has, in effect, been made Esau's lord.

This causes considerable tension between the two brothers. Later they will be reconciled, but only because of a kind of change that transpires in Jacob. In a later story, he wrestles with an angel, wrestles with God, and is renamed by God as Israel, one who strives with God. Gone is his deceit; he is defined instead by his single-minded service of God and this leads to an act of reconciliation between him and his brother Esau. "Behold, an Israelite indeed," Jesus will say of Nathaniel, "in whom there is no guile" (John 21. 47), no trickery.

Rembrandt's painting is not only about the embrace of the younger son by the Father but also about a blessing. Nouwen comments about the hands.

The two are quite different. The father's left hand touching the son's shoulder is strong and muscular. The fingers are spread out and cover a large part of the prodigal son's shoulder and back. I can see a certain pressure, especially in the thumb. That hand seems not only to touch, but, with its strength, also to hold. Even though there is a gentleness in the way the father's left hand touches his son, it is not without a firm grip.

How different is the father's right hand! This hand does not hold or grasp. It is refined, soft, and very tender. The fingers are close to each other and they have an elegant quality. It lies gently upon the son's shoulder. It wants to caress, to stroke, and to offer consolation and comfort. It is a mother's hand.

As Nouwen points out, other commentators on Rembrandt's painting "have suggested that the masculine left hand is Rembrandt's own hand, while the feminine right hand is similar to the right hand of *The Jewish Bride* painted in the same period." For Nouwen, the hands of the father open out a whole new world of meaning. As he puts it, "the Father is not simply a great patriarch. He is mother as well as father."

To add to the poignancy of the interplay of these maternal and paternal images, Henri Nouwen recounts the observation of a young women friend upon looking at a large print of Rembrandt's painting. Walking up to it, she placed her hand on the head of the younger son and said. "This is the head of a baby who has just come out of his mother's womb. Look, it is still wet, and the face is still fetus-like." As Nouwen put it, "all of us who were present saw suddenly what she saw. Was Rembrandt portraying not simply the return to the Father, but also the return to the womb of God who is Mother as well as Father?"

Earlier, Nouwen tells us, he had viewed the shaved head of the younger son more in terms of being like a prisoner in a concentration camp. Now another perspective is

provided and one which connects to two themes: first, the theme of Christ's Incarnation, the Word of God who became flesh at the *Annunciation* and nine months later is born into this world, a little child adored by angels, shepherds and kings; and, secondly, the theme of new birth, being born from above. It is all the grace of God. Grace is signified in the two hands of the Father even as the two hands illumine the total and unconditional love of God for us, a love which speaks to fathers and mothers, to brothers and sisters; in short, to all of us, a love which informs and shapes each and every form of human love. That love is the divine love symbolized in the total love of our heavenly Father. *"In this was manifested the love of God towards us, because that God sent his only-begotten Son into the world that we might live through him"* (1 John 4.9). *"For God so love the world that he gave his only-begotten Son"* (John 3. 16).

God's radical embrace of our humanity happens through the response of Mary to the divine purpose. We are embraced in the story. As one of our Anglican divines, John Hackett wonderfully and insightfully puts it, *"Christ is man born of woman to redeem both sexes."*

The hands of the Father speak of the deep depths of God's love for us. Isaiah captures this in a wonderful image that again relates to hand. *"Can a mother forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet I will not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee on the palms of my hands"* (Isaiah 49.15).

Rembrandt's painting focuses on the return of the prodigal son and as Nouwen understands, it touches upon the profound themes of rebirth and renewal. *"I begin to see,"* he says, *"not only a father who 'clasps his son in his arms,' but also a mother who caresses her child, surrounds him with the warmth of her body, and holds him against the womb from which he sprang. Thus the 'return of the prodigal son' becomes the return to God's womb, the return to the very origins of being and again echoes Jesus' exhortation to Nicodemus, to be reborn from above."* As Isaiah, too, puts it, capturing the rich interplay of these images, *"Kings shall be thy nursing fathers"* (Isaiah 49.23).

But the greater extent of that divine love and compassion imaged in the hands of the Father is shown in the words which reach out to the elder son and entreat him to come into the banquet feast of love renewed and restored. Ultimately, it seems to me, it is the Father's compassion that compels our love. It convicts our hearts and moves us to repentance. And perhaps, it is another work of art, a poem by John Donne, which complements Rembrandt's painting most wonderfully and signals to us with equal power, the nature of the reconciling love of God for our humanity. We can of course only take a hold of this love if we are like Mary and let God's word define and guide us.

Donne's poem is called *A Hymn to God the Father*. It speaks of the deep and compassionate love of the Father in relation to a profound awareness of the depths and nature of human sin. Knowing our sinfulness is equally about knowing the love of God

which is greater than our sins and follies. The poem, like the painting, reminds us of that compassionate love in the form of forgiveness.

I

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still: though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For, I have more.

II

Wilt thou forgive that sin which I have won
Others to sin? and, made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
A year, or two: but wallowed in, a score?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

III

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thy self, that at my death thy son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, thou hast done,
I fear no more.

The hands of the Father are the true center, as Nouwen notes, that is to say, the true center of our attention in the painting. They help us to glimpse something of the deep love of God for us in Jesus Christ, the deep love of the Father whose will the Son has come to do and who goes for us to the Cross. That deep love is greater than the folly of all our wastefulness and the greater folly of our envying and resentfulness. It overcomes our sin and restores us by grace. But it requires, too, our embrace of that love. It requires us to be Marian, to be like Mary and to say with her, *"be it unto me according to thy word."*

"Be it unto me according to thy word"

*Annunciation (transf.)
Prodigal Son IV
March 27th, 2012*