

Good Friday 2017.

'At the Foot of the Cross with Rembrandt'

Introduction to the Hour

- The Cross, the big reconciliation between God and his Creation. I'm not greatly attracted to the cross as it is an impersonal symbol: universal yes, but it doesn't draw me in without a great deal of intellectual effort. I hope therefore that you will allow me to preach to myself in a way, using this famous painting by Rembrandt. His painting, *'The Return of the Prodigal Son'* is an interpretation of both the cross and the parable which is printed on the reverse of the Order of Service.

The Younger Son

- Rembrandt painted this picture towards the end of his life. Born in Holland in 1606 at a time of great wealth, his paintings sold well and he enjoyed a comfortable but dissolute life-style. Life did not treat Rembrandt well. His son died aged two months; his daughters three years later and then his young wife Saskia died. He gets into debt, finds himself ensnared with some bad relationships and sells his paintings to survive. There is a hint of the Prodigal about Rembrandt's life style. There is little evidence of a lively faith but Rembrandt's works are intensely religious. If there was a conversion moment we know nothing about it but from later self-portraits he shaves his head – in stark contrast to the portraits of him and his mistress in a brothel, aged thirty.
- [At about the same time in our own country another dissolute womanizer was coming to his senses. The lawyer and priest John Donne went through a bumpy period after his marriage and was persuaded to become an Anglican priest by King James. At that moment his poetry and his life changed dramatically. The raunchy poetry becomes subdued, meditative, Christ-focused.]
- Rembrandt's history bears a striking resemblance to the parable of the Prodigal Son. He squandered his inheritance and was reduced to menial farm work. And worse than that for a Jew he had to feed the pigs belonging to a Gentile farmer!
- Then Luke tells us, *'he came to himself'* – as did Rembrandt, John Donne and a hundred thousand others. When did you 'come to yourself', pull yourself up short or feel the unseen hand of God on your shoulder? I know that feeling; it happens to me so many times, thank God!
- The younger son changes direction – he has a conversion experience – and decides to return home, dreading what his father might say. He rehearses his speech but he has underestimated his father's reaction. Overjoyed, his father runs to greet him and sweeps him off his feet with delight, relief and gratitude! When did you last feel like that – swept off your feet by the love of another? Forgiveness of this magnitude depends so much on the others' forbearance but not with God. We believe that he is beyond such changes of temperament.
- The Prodigal kneels at his father's feet, head shaven, sandals destroyed, feet calloused but wrapped in the protective and gentle hands of the father. One thing he has not lost however is his sword, the sign of his sonship. Even in those faraway fields the younger son did not forget that he belonged somewhere., to a distant family. As the sword is a sign of his sonship so is the cross on our foreheads the indelible sign of our belonging to the Christian community.

The Elder Son

- Rembrandt exercises poetic licence in this picture for the elder son was not at home when his younger brother returned. But Rembrandt places him in the picture on the extreme right hand side and the effect is electric. The elder son's jealous attitude is highlighted and there is a tension between him and the warm embrace on the left side of the picture. Luke tells us that the elder son was angry and refused to come in. So both brothers are offered the same warm embrace of the father but the elder son recoils against it. He is arrogant, resentful, jealous. He sees the apparent injustice in the family and makes his feelings known. He is dressed in a similar way to the father but the difference in their attitudes is striking. The elder son stands stiff, erect, hiding behind his staff, the sign of his authority.

- So often in a family the older children take on more responsibility. They are obedient, submissive while the younger ones are freer to do their own thing, as did the younger son in our parable. Typically, this is the situation before us in the picture and we will know how difficult it is as parents to steer an even course between them. We know that the father cares as much for the elder son as for his younger brother but we are not told how this parable resolves for the older brother. It's rather like the ragged ending of Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night'. Malvolio – the butt of all the jokes in the second half of the play – goes off, resentful, vowing revenge upon everyone.
- This highlights two categories of sin. The younger brother is lustful, promiscuous; the older one is resentful, envious, jealous. One category of sin is external as well as internal but the more difficult sin to counter is that which slowly eats away at our hearts and minds: pride, selfishness, self-pity.
- Jesus tells this parable against the scribes and Pharisees who stand and sneer at his brief ministry. But he appeals to them too. It is their own stubbornness which holds them back. How often do we see that in our society today: our own community; even our own families! How good at distraction are mothers! They can find a way to resolve stubbornness so often. The sins of the elder son can't be healed from below by obedience or hard work. We need help to get out of that bind and such help comes from above: from the Holy Spirit working through wise mothers, friends, councillors.
- God searches for us all, younger and older; lustful, resentful, proud. He is passionate to run and meet each one of us if we but turn our faces towards him.
- Francis Thompson, in his poem, 'The Hound of Heaven' sums up God's persistent search for us and our evasions:

*"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years'
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own soul, and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter..."*

- So often we see people shrugging off the call of God with a joke or a cynical remark, '*under running laughter*'. It is perhaps the most popular evasion tactic of the 21st century.
- We are all worth looking for. None of us is worthless but we can be trapped in that darkness of worthlessness. Then we need to take risks and faith is a risky business.

The Father

- I am of an age when physiotherapists keeps me going. I am constantly amazed by their skill. It's as if they have X-Ray eyes! They seem to know and can verbalize exactly what is going on deep down in the pained limb. So it would appear with this image of the father. Increasing blindness has led him to depend more on his sense of touch and he knows every inch of his son's back from an early age. Rembrandt was almost blind in his later life so is aware that blind people can often see different things to those with sight.
- My brother once did an outward bound course with a blind colleague and so often he knew the answer to some practical challenge better than all the argument from other members of the group who enjoyed perfect vision. The blind theologian Professor John Hull from Birmingham University wrote original and challenging books on practical theology. He had an inner knowledge of himself and perhaps of God.
- So we see this elderly man tenderly reaching out to his broken son. He is not grasping but transforming. These calloused hands have offered both sons freedom to leave home or to stay; to respond, to deny or to return. He gave them freedom to make their mistakes as God gives us that freedom too. Theologians call its consequences 'original sin' but there's not much which is original about my sins or yours, I guess. They are all known well by our tender and patient father.
- The father stands at the centre of the light to welcome back the Prodigal. His hands are outstretched, thankful, in blessing for that is what blessing means, to say good things. I remember an elderly woman giving me - a teenager - some sound advice. '*If you can't say something positive then say nothing at all*'.

- The father is dressed in elegant clothing. He is an affluent farmer but he asks no searching questions of his son. Rather he orders the very best in celebration of his return. Here is unconditional generosity! How often is our generosity conditional upon something which will benefit ourselves? To experience such unconditional generosity is breath-taking. I have known it often and it has shaped me. It is such unconditional generosity that the new atheist Richard Dawkins cannot understand in his earlier books. As a zoologist he searches for unconditional generosity in nature but cannot find it. Every action has a selfish purpose. Dawkins sees that same selfishness in religions, especially extremist sects whose existence is based on exclusive criteria and survival is uppermost in their minds. But the father offers unconditional generosity to both the younger and the older son. One can accept it; the other has a choice fuelled by materialism.
- Prayer (LHW 215) and Silence.

Conclusion. 'What then shall we do'?

- This painting is much more than a commentary on the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It sums up the whole process of Incarnation: God in Christ taking leave of his father in heaven to come to seek and to save us here on earth. We see this in terms of verticality which assists our puny minds. George Herbert, in his poem, *'The Pulley'* paints the picture mechanically. God descends in human form, leaving his powers behind. He comes and lives among us but is badly treated. The crisis, the turning point, for us is focused on the cross and it *is in the cross, through the cross, living the cross* that we are incorporated with the Risen Lord. The mark is on our foreheads and it beckons us to live it – living the "I" crossed out; living a little less selfishly; being a bit more compassionate. As 'the father received his sons with great joy and generosity so too we are invited to be like the father: exercising unconditional generosity, seeking ways to be co-creators of joy. It is often hard work, a constant challenge but one in which we can progress with the support of one another.
- God doesn't call us to be bystanders or cynics like the elder brother but to join the younger son, kneeling in relief, joy and thanksgiving at the feet of the father.

Amen.