

1 Kings 17.17-24

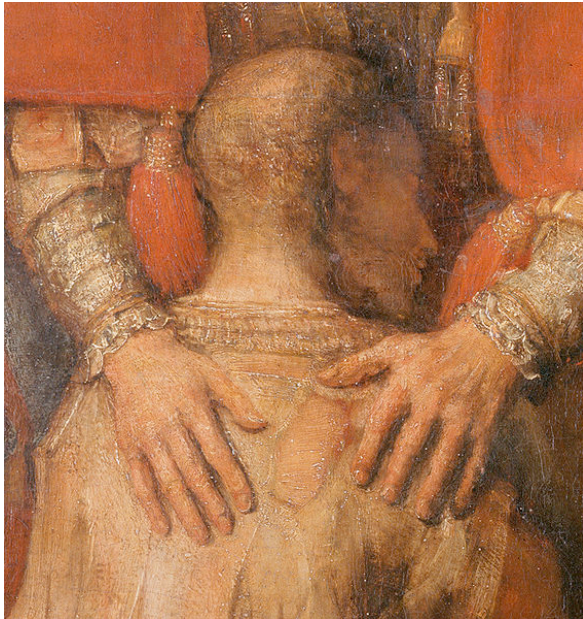
Psalm 30

Galatians 1.11-24

Luke 7. 11-17

The compassion of God: 'Jesus was moved to the depth of his heart'. Luke 7.13

Painting: Rembrandt's 'the return of the prodigal son', 1669 – detail.



Last summer in Minneapolis, I had the good fortune of seeing an exhibition of paintings by Rembrandt and his pupils, and to admire the great skill of this master. Rembrandt is thought of as one of the greatest and most influential painters in European art history.

In his life, Rembrandt knew much admiration and enjoyed great success, but there was also a great deal of personal tragedy and financial hardship. His first wife, much loved by him, died young, after having lost three children as young babies – with only their fourth baby-son living into adulthood. And he also outlived his second wife

and saw the death of his son, a few years before his own death.

This morning I have given you a detail from his painting 'the Return of the prodigal son', painted in the last years of his life – probably completed in year of his death. You maybe familiar with this painting, especially since Henry Nouwen wrote a book about it in 1992.

It shows the height of Rembrandt's art; many regard it his most moving, most tender work, his spiritual testament to the world.

The detail of the famous picture here are the hands of the loving father, placed on the shoulders of his son. The way Rembrandt uses light in the painting, our eyes are drawn to these hands expressing the father's love for his son despite the son's sorry state.

I want you to notice the hands ... the detail reveals that they don't look the same. One is thinner and slender, the other broader and plumper. We can assume that Rembrandt had the skill of painting a pair of hands, so this difference must be intentional. To me the hand on the left looks like a female hand, the one on the right male.

Is Rembrandt here depicting God's love and tenderness in all its dimensions – just as we are made in the image of God, male and female, God's love has all the characteristics that we may associate with male and female ways of expressing love.

To me, this picture shows God's disposition towards us – deep love and compassion, embracing us, as we are, in all our frailty and deepest need.

The background for this painting is of course the story of the lost son, coming home, experiencing the love and forgiveness of his father.

But to me, it also depicts the central message of this morning's gospel story – both stories are from Luke's gospel, - in which Jesus responds with deep compassion to a situation of great loss and suffering.

The New Testament scholar, William Barclay, calls it 'in many ways the loveliest story in all the gospels. It tells of all the poignancy and pathos of human life'.¹

We are witnessing the funeral of a young man, the only son of his widowed mother, and the whole village have come out to share in the occasion, to show their sympathy and support for the woman. Imagine the procession, which would have been headed by a band of professional mourners with flutes and cymbals, uttering a kind of frenzy with their shrill cries of grief, enabling the weeping mother to give expression to her feelings and pain without embarrassment.

As Jesus approaches the village, he and his followers would have been aware that the noise was coming from a funeral procession. Luke tells us that when Jesus saw the grieving woman, he had compassion for her; Barclay translates this 'he was moved to the depths of his heart'.² Jesus decided to act. He says to the woman: Do not weep. He comes forward, touches the bier – which would have been shocking to the by-standers, as Jesus made himself unclean by doing so – and says the corpse: 'Young man, I say to you rise.' The dead man sits up, begins to speak, and Jesus gives him to his mother.

Imagine watching the scene: the people around are seized by fear, and their instinct is to glorify God.' What they have just witnessed reminds them of the stories in the Old Testament, things that happened in the olden days: stories of prophets like Elijah, which we heard this morning, and also Elisha, bringing back to life the only son of grieving mother. People have just witnessed something like that happen with their own eyes.

When we listen to these stories, Jesus performing a miracle, we look for the deeper meaning; we ask what does this mean for us.

¹ The Daily Study Bible, The gospel of Luke, p.86

² Ibid. p.86

Could this be a story which is simply about compassion? Jesus being profoundly moved when he sees the grieving woman? Perhaps there was a level of pain and despair in her face that made him act the way he did. He would have seen she was a widow and guessed that this was her only son, and what this meant for her –extreme poverty and marginalisation. Jesus had the power to change this, and he did.

We may ask – so why doesn't he do this all the time? Why do I, why do people I love, why do people in my acquaintance and across the world continue to suffer the loss of loved ones: spouses and children; their suffering is not relieved by a miracle.

Jesus did not come to undo the laws of nature and spare us all pain and suffering. But he did show us that he knows about our reality, the cruelty of death, the pain of illness and loss, and he came to share it. And, to reveal God's deep, tender love for us – he revealed this through his actions and his death on the cross. That love and compassion is one of God's chief characteristics – it is how God looks on all of us, and what God wants for us and offers us, through God's presence with us, and through the fellowship of our fellow human beings.

I do wonder whether we think of God in this way, most of the time. Or do the challenges, the illnesses, the worries and losses we experience feel like we are alone and abandoned, much of the time? Does God feel distant, as if he doesn't really care and doesn't want to hear us?

Sometimes, it's hard for God to get through to us, because of the image we have of God: for example, do we think of God as so great and awesome, that God seems distant; feels severe and judgmental, demanding, not close and tender at all. In that case, we may find it hard to approach God in our deepest need.

Last week, we had the story of the Roman centurion, sending people to Jesus to ask him to heal his servant. And Sophie made the point that Jesus is always pleased when we ask Jesus for help.

Do we believe that God is on our side, that God is with us in our suffering, that God places his, her hands tenderly on our shoulders looking on us with compassion... and hearing our prayer? Do we experience God's compassionate presence -perhaps in a moment of insight, of feeling assurance, comfort and peace while praying or receiving the sacrament, or out of the blue in an unexpected moment and place? Do we encounter God's tender love through people around us; a kind, caring word; someone who goes out of their way to care for us, someone who loves us just as we are; people who are the hands and feet of Christ for us?

I don't know enough about Rembrandt to say anything about his faith and relationship with God beyond what is revealed in his paintings. But seeing this painting, he must have come to the end of his life, which contained its fair share of loss, struggle, conflict and suffering, knowing God's love, forgiveness, compassion and mercy. He painted the story of the return of the prodigal son for more than thirty years –there are earlier versions - to leave us with this final version: the image of the loving father, with hands both male and female, reflecting his insight into the breadth of God's love and engagement with us, gently holding and affirming, saying ' I understand your searching, your suffering, your struggle and confusion. I am with you. I love you. Amen.