

## A Reflection on Forgiveness



This is the famous “Return of the Prodigal Son” painted by Rembrandt in about 1668. It’s actually only about a half of the original with the rest of the picture showing several people looking on as the father welcomes his son home. There are copies of the painting in each of our reconciliation rooms in order, hopefully, to convey an immediate message to anyone coming to confession as to what the sacrament is all about: love, compassion, understanding and unconditional forgiveness - not fear, punishment or retribution.

It has also given me plenty of opportunity between confessions to reflect on the many details contained in the painting. Some of them are quite interesting and may perhaps go unnoticed unless we are specifically looking for them.

Henri Nouwen wrote a short reflection on the father’s hands, how they appear to be different and that, given what a superb artist

Rembrandt was, it was quite deliberately done and not that he was just rubbish at painting hands (my words, not Nouwen’s!) The father’s right hand (to the left in the picture) appears slim and delicate as a woman’s hand might be, whereas the father’s left hand is a gnarled and stronger-

looking masculine hand. Nouwen suggested this was meant to illustrate both the masculine and feminine dimensions of God, his power and his tenderness – in this case the tenderness of a compassionate welcome

combined with the power of forgiving love. On closer inspection, the sleeves of the father’s garment look appropriately different – one with a lace cuff, the other more simply embroidered.



**I** have also found myself contemplating another detail of the painting – the son’s sandals. As you can see from the close-up, the left sandal has come off his foot and, from what can be seen of it, the heel looks very worn down – indeed almost complete gone. The heel of the other sandal is just about as bad. The context of the story and the wear and tear on the sandals, brought to mind the phrase “down on your uppers” referring to someone’s shoes being so worn down that the sole is gone and only the uppers remain – the shoe is therefore useless. The phrase is used to describe someone who is down on his luck,



impoverished, in dire straits, quite literally “down-at-the-heel”. Perhaps this was another detail deliberately included by Rembrandt.

**T**he parable (from chapter 15 of St Luke’s gospel) gives no specific information as to how much time had passed between the son leaving home and his penitential return. How long did it take him to “squander his inheritance”? How long did it take before he “came to his senses”? How far was the journey and how long did it take before he reached home and was embraced by his loving father who had been out every day looking for him? Long enough to wear out a good pair of sandals Rembrandt would suggest. How much longer, how much further, before he would have been walking barefoot?

**W**hen we sin – especially deliberately – we too take our inheritance and squander it. But all the time God is out watching for us, confident that one day we will return. It’s almost as if his grace is reaching out to us, actively searching us out, like the good shepherd in search of the lost sheep or the woman sweeping her house looking for the lost coin. By the help of that grace, hopefully we will come to our senses and return home confident of being welcomed by the gentle loving hand, not the punishing hand, of God – just as Jesus taught in the parable. Hopefully too, there is still enough leather on the soles of our shoes to get us there – but the risk increases the longer we take.

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**T**oday’s gospel (for the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C - Luke 6 v 27-38) takes the process of forgiveness a step further and invites us to reflect on the need to forgive others just as we have been forgiven...a phrase we meet daily in the

Lord's Prayer. And it isn't just a matter of forgiving because we have been forgiven, but of forgiving in the same way that we have been forgiven...and there's the rub, as Shakespeare put it.

The son in the parable expected the worst, indeed he knew full well that he deserved the worst and that's no doubt what delayed his decision. The nearer he got to home, the more the dark cloud gathered overhead. But then the unbelievable happened – nothing, nothing bad or negative anyway, instead his father rushed out to welcome him home, embraced him and immediately set about organising a celebration. That's how we hope God will receive and forgive us even though we know we don't deserve it, and, indeed, that's exactly how he does welcome and forgive us because that's how much he loves us. What we deserve doesn't enter into it. But, then, that's also how he expects us to forgive others because he loves them – and so should we. It's the lesson Jesus taught in another of his parables about the steward whose great debt was cancelled by his master but who then went out and demanded debts owed to him.

Of course that's where human nature enters in. So often we can find it very difficult to forgive others mainly because we stew on the offence that has been committed against us, justifying how we feel, and placing all sorts of conditions on any possibility of working things out. That's not how God works. And even if we do forgive, we don't easily forget and typically find ourselves being very grudging about things returning to how they were before. That's not how God works either. In both cases there may be forgiveness of a sort, but is there love? Love is the thing that papers over the cracks so well that you can no longer tell where the break occurred - that's how God works.

That kind of forgiveness, combined with love is what we can find difficult. God asks that we love one another just as he loves us. I'm sure he doesn't always *like* us (or what we do and say) but he does always *love* us, and one component of that is unconditional acceptance – warts and all, as they say. We have our problems with other people and they with us, others offend us and we offend them – it isn't meant to be that way but, sadly, that's how things are as a result of original sin and we have to work within our imperfections and that's where grace comes in if we ask for it. Things happen and we may not always like someone as a result, but we do still have to love them and part of that is finding it in our hearts to forgive them – or at least having the desire to do so and working toward helping it happen.

We have got to hold before our eyes the image of the prodigal son in the arms of his father; that's how God forgives us and that's how he asks us to forgive others. And, yes, it's easier for God than it's sometimes going to be for us, but think of some occasion when we have experienced absolute forgiveness from

God for some sin or sins we were deeply ashamed of. Do we still remember the tremendous feeling of relief involved and the opportunity that was thereby opened up for us to prove to God that we had learned from our mistake and to do better? That's the same experience that God calls on us to extend to those who have offended us. We have repeatedly experienced God's forgiving love – how can we possibly justify being slow to forgive others in the same way? It's something we have got to work at and pray about; it's a grace we have got to seek.

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Fr Neil McNicholas