

The Welcome of the Compassionate Father

[LUKE 15:11-32](#)

Looking attentively at Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, I ask you:

- What do you notice first?
- Where does the light fall, and what remains in the shadows?
- What might the kneeling man be feeling?
- What do you notice about the older man's hands?
- What might the standing man on the right be thinking?
- What title would you give this painting?
- What feelings does the painting stir in you? Peace? Sadness? Relief? Unease? Where would you place yourself in this scene?

A title that comes to mind when I look at this painting is *The Welcome of the Compassionate Father*.

Jesus told this story because religious people were complaining about him. They said, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus answered with the parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the father with two lost sons.

The younger son is lost. He asks for his share of the family property, leaves home, wastes everything and finally has nothing. Hunger brings him to his senses. He prepares a speech and starts the long road home.

Look at him in the painting. His clothes are torn. One sandal has almost disappeared. His head is bare. He has nothing to offer. He kneels as someone who has reached the end of himself.

Perhaps some of us know that place. We may have made choices we regret. We may carry shame that nobody else can see. We may wonder whether we can ever begin again.

But the centre of the story is not the son's failure. It is the father's welcome.

Jesus says that while the son was still far away, his father saw him. That means the father had not forgotten him. Perhaps he had watched the road many times. He sees the son, feels compassion and runs towards him.

The son begins his speech, but the father does not make him bargain for a place in the family. He calls for a robe, a ring and sandals. He calls for food and music. The son returns hoping to become a servant, but the father receives him as a son.

Look again at the father's hands. Henri Nouwen said that these hands are the heart of the painting. One appears broad and firm. The other appears gentle and soft. Nouwen saw in them both a father's strength and a mother's tenderness. God's love holds us firmly and touches us gently. It protects, comforts and restores.

The father's red cloak also seems to form a shelter around the son. It is almost like a tent, or wings spread over someone tired and wounded. The son has stopped defending himself. He rests against the father's chest. For the moment, he simply allows himself to be held.

Some people find the word "father" difficult because their own father was absent, harsh or unsafe. Jesus is not saying that God is like the worst father we have known. Jesus shows us the Father by whom every human love must be measured: one who sees, runs, embraces and restores. This love has the strength we may call fatherly and the tenderness we may call motherly. It is greater than our limited pictures of God.

But there is another son.

Look at the man standing on the right. He is well dressed, upright and watchful. His hands are held close to himself. He is with the father, yet he seems far from him.

The elder son has stayed home and worked hard. When he hears music, he becomes angry. He will not go into the celebration. He speaks as if he were a servant: "All these years I have worked for you." He compares himself with his brother and decides that the welcome is unfair.

The younger son was lost in a distant country. The elder son is lost at home. One is trapped by shame; the other by resentment. One believes, "I am no longer worthy." The other believes, "I deserve more." Neither understands the father's love.

And what does the father do? He goes out to both sons. He runs to meet the younger one, and he leaves the celebration to plead with the elder one. He does not shame either of them. He wants to bring both home.

This parable invites us to recognise ourselves in all three main figures. At times we are the younger son, running away and needing mercy. At times we are the elder son, staying near but growing cold, bitter or judgmental. Yet we are not meant to remain only one or the other. As we receive the father's love, we are called to become like the father.

That means learning to welcome people without making them pass a test first. It means refusing to define people by their worst mistake. It means celebrating when someone finds life again. It means going towards both the ashamed person who fears coming through the door and the resentful person who stands outside with folded arms.

What kind of church does Jesus place before us?

A church that watches the road. A church that makes room at the table. A church where truth can be spoken without cruelty, and where failure is not the end of anyone's story.

The painting leaves us with a question: Where are we standing today?

Perhaps you are kneeling, tired of carrying our past. If that is your case, know that the Father sees you and comes towards you.

Perhaps you are standing at the edge, comparing yourself with others and finding it hard to share their joy. Then hear the Father's invitation: "You are always with me. Come inside."

Perhaps you are being asked to become the welcoming person, to place compassionate hands on wounded shoulders, open the door, and prepare the table.

God's kingdom is a home where the lost are found, the ashamed are covered, the bitter are invited, and joy has the final word.

The picture is not yet finished. The elder son has not answered. We do not know whether he will enter the feast. Jesus leaves a space in the story so that we may step into it.

Will we receive the Father's love? Will we share the Father's joy? Will we help others find their way home?

May the Holy Spirit teach us to rest in God's embrace and to become people whose hands welcome, comfort and heal.

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