

GOSPEL WONDERS

A different way to look at the gospels

The Prodigal Son (suggested) Order of Service

1. Hymn 34 – O Worship the Lord in the Beauty of Holiness.
2. Opening prayer
3. Introduction
4. Hymn 404 – Gods Spirit is in my Heart.
5. Mother and Father
6. Hymn 523 – It's me O Lord Standing in the need of Prayer.
7. Younger Son
8. Hymn 655 – We cannot measure How You Heal
9. Elder Son
10. Prayers of intercession
11. Hymn 471 – Lord I come to you
12. Conclusion
13. Hymn 663 – I the Lord of Sea and Sky.
14. Epilogue

(All hymns from Singing the Faith)

Opening prayers

Prayers to the Glory of Creation

For the earth, for the sea and for the sky in all their textures and colours,
We give you thanks O Lord.

For all the glories and wonders of nature, the way so many things come together to
make a working whole.

We give you thanks O Lord.

For your gifts, the food we eat, the skills of all who bring it to us, for the people who
care for us and the lives we share.

We give you thanks O Lord.

For the gift of Him sent to save us and your spirit who steers the course of our lives
and lets us know that you are always with us

We give you thanks O Lord.

For setting us, like the stars on our courses and the loving care you give us.

We give you thanks O Lord.

A Prayer for Forgiveness.

Creator and Saviour, In the light of all your goodness and blessings why is it that so
often we let you down. As a people we destroy the earth, turn our backs on the cycles
of life and bring about the destruction of creatures, plants, and the people. We seem
to have turned our backs when you made us the stewards of your gifts. So, we come to
you thinking of any part we might have played in this, remembering anything that we
have done to hurt our surroundings or those who live in it and have suffered because
of our actions. Seeking your forgiveness,

Let us consider is there anything we could have done better and seek forgiveness
today.

We ask forgiveness knowing that through Jesus we can be forgiven.

For this. We give you thanks O Lord

Lord's Prayer

Introduction

Today we are going to follow a story that many of us will know. It introduces us to three people. A father and his two sons. By exploring three different personalities, and how they relate, it demonstrates the different ways in which people respond to each other and how circumstances affect their view of the world around them.

Many people have interpreted this story and endeavoured to explain the dynamics. We are going to look at how one man saw it. Rembrandt painted what is possibly the most famous picture of the moment the son returned. The original is on display at the Hermitage in St Petersburg. Unfortunately, they would not let us borrow it today. *(a copy of the whole painting, and a more detailed view of the father and son are on the following pages).*

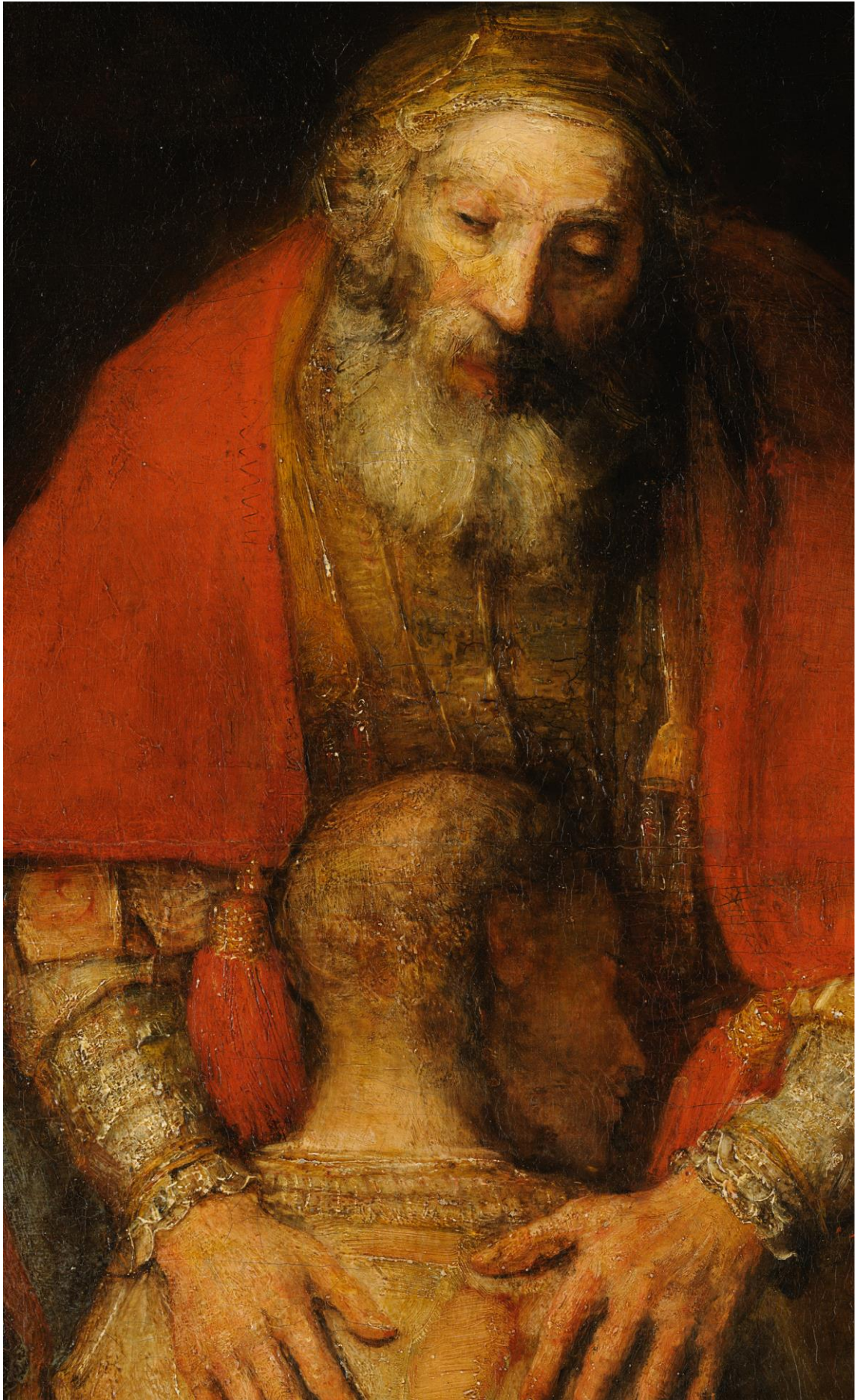
How did the Father see it? One of those situations that many people would relate to. A child that is kicking over the traces. The question being what would we do about it? If we put ourselves in that position how would we approach it? Could you see yourself responding with worried concern? Would we refuse to go along with them or would we write them off as a waste of space? Would we only go with it if we expected them to shape up a bit? So how did this father see it?

The younger son was quite clear about how he saw it. Once again have we ever been in that position? Just wanting to put space between us and the world we live in. Ready to move out and look for greener grass on the other side of the hill and not particularly concerned about the feelings of others. Probably not an uncommon situation. This young man fancied a gap year or two or three and threw himself into it with a vengeance, mind you, he had some hard lessons to learn.

Then we have the elder son. How angry did he feel about things? So angry at what he saw as the unfairness of life. We know little about him but we can understand why he felt that way. Suddenly his stable life was turned upside and he didn't know what was going to happen to him.



"The Return of the Prodigal Son", by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, c. 1669



Mother & Father

Father. Where is he, what has got into him? I just cannot get him out of my mind,

Mother. Well! I blame you. You were always too soft on him. You spoiled him. Everyone tried to tell you but you wouldn't listen. Even the servants got fed up with him and as he got older the young girls were terrified of him. But Oh no! You always knew better. Now look at the state he has got you into.

Father. Maybe you're right. I know he was a bit wild but----

Mother. A bit wild: He was spoiled and by you. Nothing was too good for your precious one even if it meant that the rest of us suffered. Now you are the one suffering.

Father. Well! When he asked me for the money, I thought he was growing up a bit. You know taking on a bit of responsibility. I thought he had some business plans. I didn't realise that he was going to turn it into cash and leave us.

Mother. Well! You know now and from the stories that those merchants told about him all he has done has brought discredit on our name and wasted everything you gave him.

Father. Yes, I know. But I still don't think I was wrong to give him the choice. He may learn a lesson and eventually come back to us a different person.

Mother. Oh! My dear. I hope your right. I miss him as well but I can't see it ever happening. But come on in. It's on use sitting out here looking down the road. If he ever does return it will be in his own time and letting your life drift away sitting there won't bring him back any quicker.

Father. Yes! I know my dear but I'll sit a little longer. He might just come back today. You know if he came round that bend in the road, I would just run up to him and through my arms around him. I could forgive him anything Just to have him home again.

The Younger Son

Well, I wasn't cut out to be a farmer. I was suffocated living on the family farm. Can you imagine it? Day after day the same thing. Planting crops, harvesting crops. Then the animals. All muck and smells. Stupid beasts. Never did what you wanted, always awkward, what a waste of time.

The people weren't much better. Clods whose only conversation was the weather or the harvest. True there were a couple of pretty girls working in the kitchen but they could think of nothing but getting married and babies and then went to chapel on Sunday and came back all holier than though

You know I just had to get away. Mind you I had one ally even though he didn't realise it. The old man.

I could always twist him around my finger. Something about me nearly dying when I was born. He never believed what people said about me. I could always talk him round.

Anyway, I persuaded him that I had a good business plan and that if he would give me my inheritance, I could do something really worthwhile. He fell for it. He fell for it. He looked so proud when he thought was worthwhile. Fool I thought.

Any way as soon as I got my hands on the loot I was on my way.

Wine women and song. New places, new friends, new experiences, life was great

For a while then the money ran out. So did my friends. I suddenly realised that I was the sucker.

I ended up looking after the pigs. No pay just what I could scrounge. At least it was warm living in the pig house. Do you know sitting there with the stink of the pigs in my nose, on my own. Nobody, particularly the girls, wanted to join me now. I got to thinking.

Suddenly the farm at home seemed a pretty good place to be. My father would never allow any of his servants to live like this. This man who always seemed a bit of a clown was actually a good man. What would he do if he could see me now? Knowing him he would probably burst into tears and throw his arms around me. He would still try to see the best in me. Maybe if I went back. To do that I would need to eat a fair slice of humble. I couldn't do it. Or could I? I have learned some lessons. How do I prove it? If he would take me on as a hired hand. Who knows? Well! I have learned to look after animals, maybe one day I could even get used to going to chapel.

Elder Son

It's not been too bad since our kid went away. He had always been a bit of a pain. You could never rely on him to finish a job. Always skiving off and when he did do it you probably had to check everything because it was only half done. He always said he was meant for better things than farming and had no aptitude for it. Load of rubbish. He was just bone idle and the old man let him get away with it. Couldn't see through him. To be honest when he went, I thought good riddance to bad rubbish. Sure, we heard from travellers some of the things he was getting up to and I know it hurt father but for me I was glad to see the back of him. I enjoyed being a farmer, was proud of what I did and achieved.

Then one day there he was. I wasn't there when he arrived but a couple of the house servants told me about it when I got in from the fields. Turned up dressed in rags, smelling as though he had been living in a pigsty. Burbled to the old man that he had got it all wrong and only wanted to become a paid servant and was sorry for all the mistakes he had made.

Nothing changes. Father threw his arms around him, burst into tears and dragged him into the house like an honoured guest. Even set up a banquet for him. Load of rubbish. If it had been me, I would have invited him to wash himself off in the cattle trough, given him servants clothes to wear and sent him to eat with the servants, but no not my father.

I couldn't stomach it. For years I had done my job to the best of my ability and got nothing for it. Then here was this wastrel waltzing in and taking over. I knew what would happen. He would be back with his feet under the table and then, though the farm was now mine when father died, he would try to get some of it for himself when the time came. I just went into the barn to think it over. I was half tempted to walk out and set up on my own. But then I thought it through. That would be cutting off my nose to spite my face. Anyway, father was a good man. Always had been. Was known for it in the district. He would not treat me unfairly when it came to it. I know that he loved and respected me for myself.

You never know. That young brother of mine might have learned a few things while he was away; they say travel broadens the mind, so he could be useful I wonder if we could start breeding pigs. We will have to see.

Anyway, it sounds as though they are having a party in there and it would be a shame to miss wouldn't it?

Intercessions

Now we come to our time of prayer for the world and its people.

Lord, first of all we think of your world. A place of infinite variety, some good as shown in the love and lives of its people. Some bad where the worst elements of human thoughts and actions dominate,

Next, we think of your church. We remember this church-----and all those who worship and support it. We pray for them that you will remain in their efforts and guide them in the paths that you wish them to follow.

We pray for your church worldwide that its leaders will make the decisions that you would wish, and we would remember particularly those who suffer persecution, who are ostracised and harmed for acknowledging you as their saviour. For all your people we would give thanks for their witness and ask that you continue to watch over them, protect and strengthen them in their lives.

Then Lord we remember the world. A place where individuals and groups work hard to improve the lives of their fellows. For them we pray for your strength and support. That you will aid and guide them in their efforts. There are however those who breath hatred and violence; those who, in furtherance of their own agendas, behave in a way that causes suffering to the vulnerable and poor. That bring pain in their train,

Lord we pray that you will support those who work for peace; the medics who bring healing, those people who move into destroyed communities bringing hope to all those who support them at home

Finally, Lord we remember those we know personally; those we know personally who are sick in body and mind, those who find themselves in dark places, those who are experiencing times of loss on our hearts. In the silence we bring them before you asking that you bring them comfort and support and let them know you are with them and that they rest in your love.

For all of those people and situations we thank you for your love and hold them in our hearts.

Amen

Conclusion

The legal and social situation

The son would be entitled to a third of the inheritance. But only after the father's death. With inheritance came responsibility to the clan to preserve or increase its value. By asking for it early before the father's death the son was virtually saying he wished him dead. He also wasted his inheritance without responsibility.

The elder son's role would be to act as negotiator. In order to save face for the family. A role he declined to follow. This may have shown a rift between himself and his Father.

The father's behaviour was totally outside the norm to what was expected. His neighbours would have expected him to refuse his precocious son and punish him. By not doing so he was demeaning himself and appearing to have no pride, dignity or self-respect.

As we have seen, the son very rapidly spent all the money and his only recourse was to attach himself to nearby landowner who had a responsibility to him or any other person who found themselves in need. He attempted to offload this responsibility by sending him to work with pigs. He might have considered it was a fitting role for a pork hating Jew.

So how did Rembrandt come to paint what was to become one of his best known and loved paintings.

Born in July 1606 the eighth of nine children to Catholic parents converted to Calvinism.

While his siblings went into various trades his parents must have had a sense that he had potential to greatness. At seven they sent him to a Calvinist based school where he learned Latin and the Gospels in Greek. Prayers had to be learned by heart and a chapter of the bible read every morning and a lesson in singing hymns and psalms

Sunday the whole school went to church. Monday they were tested on the sermon.

At 14 he went to university based on the principles of Calvinism and Humanism. He learned to make connections between antiquity and the bible, relating classical and Old Testament stories in moral and typological terms. To make connections between past events and those in the bible. To relate classical and Old Testament stories to the New, and find the parallel and moral teachings in both.

However, he wasn't much of a scholar and his parents being sensible accepted his love for art and apprenticed him to a renowned artist. A wise decision as after three years it was here that his future greatness would be displayed. He became one of the greatest pictorial Dramatists of God's word.

After marrying Sacha, who had money, he lived a comfortable life.

But between 1630 and 1642 tragedy struck when he lost seven relatives including his mother, son and two daughters and Sacha his beloved wife. Possibly it is said through the plague.

His creativity declined and he was taken to court, financially ruining him.

Gradually he began painting again but gone were the classical bright colours as instead he captured the stillness and serenity he loved, this time with success. His use of Chiaroscuro, the art of using dark and light muted colours and the psychology of his scenes is said to demonstrate God taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary. That through his tragic life and his paintings he had gone through a spiritual journey.

How do we understand Rembrandts Return of the Prodigal Son?

The picture explains the rich dark factors, in order to increase the dramatic intensity of the event.

Critics can't agree who the secondary figures in the shadows are. He only emphasises the central figures to the story, as well as Calvin's commentary on the Luke story in order to demonstrate Gods readiness to meet and forgive a sinner.

Magdalene Lawler: A sister and scholar at Notre Dame suggests the theme of the painting represents the spiritual homecoming of all human kind.

It is a picture of great tragedy, compassion, love and absolute forgiveness.

So, what does it tell us of the Son?

He is shown in an attitude of complete peace and rest. Although he is dirty, head shaved, and his clothes are in rags. Bruised and dusty by life. He is oblivious to all around him aware only of the fathers love and forgiveness as he presses his head to the father's breast. He hears only the heart of someone who loves him and welcomes his return. With eyes closed he embraces the smells, the softness of the garments and rests in a time of mutual love. Can you sense the gentle words spoken and the soft gentle touch of God and savour the mystery of forgiveness.

Then we have the older son.

Standing in the background. Less confident and jealous of the love shown by his elderly father. Wanting to be a part of the group but hesitates. He hovers but involuntarily observes some of the light around and is drawn into that light.

Do we understand being on the outside wanting to express our sorrow for past resentments.

Find it hard to be happy and feel resentment at others good fortune. That no matter what you try it alludes you.

Resentment can make you bitter and separate you when you need the fathers touch just as the younger son did.

What of the father.

His love is freely given, without condition. This gentle old man is a figure of an ancient Patriarch of Israel. By following God it was revealed to them in compassion, wisdom, might and justice. His clouded eyes symbolise love that turns a blind eye to our failings. Tired eyes who never stops looking for us. The richness of the clothes denoting the richness of the grace as well all the special richness of his welcome he extends to his younger son.

How does it speak to us today?

Young people seeking freedom and excitement, new beginnings or looking for employment or accommodation can feel that they have let their parents down and may lose touch with home. They turn to drugs and drink. The parents may search in vain but never cease their searching. They pray that the tap on the door will bring good news that the daughter or son is safe once more.

The young man in the painting could be one of the many homeless throughout the world, sleeping rough, in fear of the night and cold coming. Rembrandts message reminds us of a profound understanding of the night. It was only in that darkest night that the powers of darkness showed the power of Christ.

The two central figures are surrounded by night. A place where the son had spent much of his young life. Rembrandt includes many messages in this painting and this is makes a final message. What is it? Simple. When Jesus came the world moved from the darkness into the light.

Blessing

If our story gives you pause,
Then think again you have no cause,
For worry.
They are but shadows from times long gone,
And yet, their memory lingers on.

To us who nurse the flame of love,
That precious gift from Him above

The door is ever open wide.
For all who would to step in side.

Friends, leave, held by his grace
His blessing now let all embrace.

References

'Home Tonight: Further Reflections on the Parable of the Prodigal Son' by Henri J.M. Nouwen. Published by Darton, Longmen and Todd Ltd. ISBN: 9780232527735

'Rembrandt' by Greg Watts. Published by Lion Hudson Plc. ISBN: 9780745952840

'Rembrandt: Images & Metaphors' by Christian Tümpel. Published by Haus Publishing. ISBN: 9781904950929

'The Return of the Prodigal Son, A Story of Homecoming' by Henri J.M. Nouwen. Published by Darton, Longmen and Todd Ltd. ISBN: 9780232520026

'Show Us the Father' by Magdalen Lawler. Published by Pauline Books & Media. ISBN: 9781904785637