**Sermon: Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost 3 Oct 2021**

**Jonah 1.1-2.1 & 2.10, Ps 130, Hebrews 1.1-4, 2.5-12, Luke 10:25-37**

Rembrandt created a painting within a couple of years of his passing known as ‘The Return of the Prodigal Son’. It is a striking image. The father is lent over the son who has retuned, who is now kneeling at the fathers feet, resting his head upon the father’s chest. The father’s clothing and indeed the second son who is standing to the right of the image highlight their status, adorned in red cloaks. The finery of their clothing tells us of their wealth and standing in the community. On the other hand, the son now kneeling at the feet of his father is dressed in the clothing of a servant, one sandal has fallen off one foot while the other looks dilapidated, barely hanging on. The look on the father’s face reveals the sadness he felt at the loss of his son. You can only see one side of the prodigal son’s face, but what strikes me is the way his head is shaved, or cut so finely back which represents to me how low he has stooped as if he had been conscripted into an army or more accurately made a slave, a prisoner of his own making. In the image there are three other figures. The first sitting beside the other son, who is standing at the forefront of the image, is also dressed well, his clothing suggests he also is of high status. The one standing near this man is clothed in very plain garb, almost indistinguishable from the surrounds in the background. In the far left hand corner, stands the mother of the son who had strayed. At first glance you may entirely miss that she is in the image at all. She stands, blending completely into the background. It is as if her shame of losing her son is too much to bear. But it is the father and son in the foreground which catches my attention. The father expresses such love, gentleness with his hands placed on the back of the son. The hands are still, as if pressing calmness, love and grace into the sons back. One hand is quite masculine while the other looks feminine, invoking the qualities of God as both and; masculine and feminine. My ponderings have sprung from reading Henry Nouwen’s book by the same title, ‘Return of the Prodigal Son’

Nouwen’s life experience from academic life leads him to leave academia. Instead he moves to Canada to live among a community that assisted people with mental disabilities known as Daybreak. Prior to moving to Canada he had an opportunity to go to Russia and spend time meditating on Rembrandt’s painting. Suffice to say, it proved life changing in the midst of a life that to some may have thought appeared well put together. He had lived with his parents, an obedient and thoughtful young man, who had wanted to be a priest from the age of 5. He pursued that path. But as can happen, in the midst of life, many setbacks and challenges lay in his path. I think this can be true of so many people. None of us truly know what another human being has faced in their life. The painting took Nouwen on an inner journey of discovering more about himself and the God we serve. He discovered that at one time or another he had been the son kneeling at the father’s feet, or the second son standing with pride gazing down on this brother that had disgraced the family, and at another, which took some time to work through, the father, kneeling with patience, grace and mercy, receiving the son with tenderness and love.

Rembrandt’s painting is an image of great forgiveness. We need to go back to the beginning of the story to truly understand how grievous it was for the son to demand his portion of the inheritance. As it had been explained to Nouwen, it was tantamount to calling the father dead. In middle eastern cultures, to demand ones inheritance is to figuratively ‘kill the father’, (and or parents). It would also bring great shame upon the family. The one Jesus tells us about is obviously quite wealthy, and the higher in society at least in 1st century Jerusalem, the greater the shame brought upon the family. Nonetheless, in the parable, Jesus says the father gives him the inheritance and the son takes it and sets off, travelling to a far off land. It is as if the son initially in his pride wants to rid himself of his familial ties only to find after spending all that had, starving among pigs.

The son comes to himself, saying, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you I am no longer worthy to be called your son’. But the father does the direct opposite to what the son expects, calling for a robe to be brought, to put a ring on his finger and new sandals on his feet. A fatted calf is called for and for a celebration to take place.

In our gospel reading today, there is a great similarity taking place. The question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ may bring out in us either the love, mercy and grace that the father showed the son in the parable of the Prodigal, or it could bring out in us the jealousy, the rage or displeasure as shown by the second son. Who then is my neighbour? Everyone, the poor, the rich, the sick, the homeless, the comfortable. I could go on and I imagine that you could come up with other groups as well. The point Jesus is making in the parable is the one who showed mercy was the neighbour to the Samaritan who had been left half dead by the side of the road.

God brings many people across our paths, some daily, some now and then. How do we think about the people who cross our paths in the street, where we live, when we venture out for a walk? You and I are called to love God with all our being and to love our neighbours as ourselves. It’s not an easy call. I don’t think Jesus meant it to be. We are to live by God’s grace, calling on God in our human frailties. In those times when we find it hard to love our neighbours. Rembrandt’s image is a good reminder of how loving, how compassionate God’s love is toward each one of us. You and I are invited to live in that embrace of God’s love. You and I are called to draw closer to God to share that embrace of God’s love with others in our church and in the world.

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.