THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SONHENRI NOUWETHE YOUNGER SON

The younger son said to his father, "Father, let me have the share of the estate that will come to me." So the father divided the property between them. A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery. When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled himself with the husks the pigs were eating but no one would let him have them. Then he came to his senses and said, "How many of my father's hired men have all the food they want and more, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men." So he left the place and went back to his father.

REMBRANDT AND THE YOUNGER SON

Rembrandt was dose to his death when he painted his *Prodigal Son.* Most likely it was one of Rembrandt's last works. The more I read about it and look at it, the more I see it as a final statement of a tumultuous and tormented life. Together with his unfinished painting *Simeon and the Child Jesus*, the *Prodigal San* shows the painter's perception of his aged self - a perception in which physical blindness and a deep inner seeing are intimately connected. The way in which the old Simeon holds the vulnerable child and the way in which the old father embraces his exhausted son reveal an inner vision that reminds one of Jesus' words to his disciples: "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see." Both Simeon and the father of the returning son carry *within* themselves that mysterious light by which they see. It is an inner light, deeply hidden, but radiating an all pervasive tender beauty.

This inner light, however, had remained hidden for a long rime. For many years it remained unreachable for Rembrandt. Only gradually and through much anguish did he come to know that light within himself and, through himself, in those he painted. Before being like the father, Rembrandt was for a long time like the proud young man who "got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money."

When I look at the profoundly interiorized self-portraits which Rembrandt produced during his last years and which explain much of his ability to paint the luminous old father and the old Simeon, I must not forget that, as a young man, Rembrandt had all the characteristics of the prodigal son: brash, self-confident, spendthrift, sensual, and very arrogant. At the age of thirty, he painted himself with his wife, Saskia, as the lost son in a brothel. No interiority is visible there. Drunk, with his half-open mouth and sexually greedy eyes, he glares scornfully at those who look at his portrait as if to say: "Isn't this a lot of fun!" With his right hand he lifts up a half-empty glass, while with his left he touches the lower back of his girl whose eyes are no less lustful than his own. Rembrandt's long, curly hair, his velvet cap with the huge white feather, and the leather-sheathed sword with golden hilt touching the backs of the two merrymakers leave little doubt about their intentions. The drawn curtain in the upper right corner even makes one think of the brothels in Amsterdam's infamous red-light district. Gazing intently at this sensuous self-portrait of the young Rembrandt as the prodigal son, I can scarcely believe that this is the same man who, thirty years later, painted himself with eyes that penetrate so deeply into the hidden mysteries of life.

Still, all the Rembrandt biographers describe him as a proud young man, strongly convinced of his own genius and eager to explore everything the world has to offer; an extrovert who loves

luxury and is quite insensitive toward those about him. There is no doubt that one of Rembrandt's main concerns was money. He made a lot, he spent a lot, and he lost a lot. A large part of his energy was wasted in long, drawn-out court cases about financial settlements and bankruptcy proceedings. The self-portraits painted during his late twenties and early thirties reveal Rembrandt as a man hungry for fame and adulation, fond of extravagant costumes, preferring golden chains to the traditional starched white collars, and sporting outlandish hats, berets, helmets, and turbans. Although much of this elaborate dressing-up can be explained as a normal way to practice and show off painting techniques, it also demonstrates an arrogant character who wasn't simply out to please his sponsors.

However, this short period of success, popularity, and wealth is followed by much grief, misfortune, and disaster. Trying to summarize the many misfortunes of Rembrandt's life can be overwhelming. They are not unlike those of the prodigal son. After having lost his son Rumbartus in 1635, his first daughter Cornelia in 1638, and his second daughter Cornelia in 1640, Rembrandt's wife Saskia, whom he deeply loved and admired, dies in 1642. Rembrandt is left behind with his nine-month-old son, Titus. After Saskia's death, Rembrandt's life continues to be marked with countless pains and problems. A very unhappy relationship with Titus' nurse, Geertje Dircx, ending in lawsuits and the confinement of Geertje in an asylum, is followed by a more stable union with Hendrickje Stoffels. She bears him a son who dies in 1652 and a daughter, Cornelia, the only child who will survive him.

During these years, Rembrandt's popularity as a painter plummeted, even though some collectors and critics continued to recognize him as one of the greatest painters of the time. His financial problems became so severe that in 1656 Rembrandt is declared insolvent and asks for the right to sign over all his property and effects for the benefit of his creditors to avoid bankruptcy. All of Rembrandt's possessions, his own and other painters' works, his large collection of artefacts, his house in Amsterdam and his furniture, are sold in three auctions during 1657 and 1658.

Although Rembrandt would never become completely free of debt and debtors, in his early fifties he is able to find a modicum of peace. The increasing warmth and interiority of his paintings during this period show that the many disillusionments did not embitter him. On the contrary, they had a purifying effect on his way of seeing. Jakob Rosenberg writes: "He began to regard man and nature with an even more penetrating eye, no longer distracted by outward splendour or theatrical display." In 1663, Hendrickje dies, and five years later, Rembrandt witnesses not only the marriage but also the death of his beloved son, Titus. When Rembrandt himself dies in 1669, he has become a poor and lonely man. Only his daughter Cornelia, his daughter-in-law Magdalene van Loo, and his granddaughter Titia survived him.

As I look at the prodigal son kneeling before his father and pressing his face against his chest, I cannot but see there the once so self-confident and venerated artist who has come to the painful realization that all the glory he had gathered for himself proved to be vain glory. Instead of the rich garments with which the youthful Rembrandt painted himself in the brothel, he now wears only a torn undertunic covering his emaciated body, and the sandals, in which he had walked so far, have become worn out and useless.

Moving my eyes from the repentant son to the compassionate father, I see that the glittering light reflecting from golden chains, harnesses, helmets, candles, and hidden lamps has died out and been replaced by the inner light of old age. It is the movement from the glory that seduces one into an ever greater search for wealth and popularity to the glory that is bidden in the human soul and surpasses death.

THE YOUNGER SON LEAVES

The younger one said to his father, "Father, let me have the share of the estate that will come to me." So the father divided the property between them. A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and lift for a distant country.

A Radical Rejection

The full tide of Rembrandt's painting is, as has been said, *The Return of the Prodigal Son.* Implicit in the "return" is a leaving. Returning is a homecoming after a home-leaving, a coming back after having gone away. The father who welcomes his son home is so glad because this son "was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found." The immense joy in welcoming back the lost son hides the immense sorrow that has gone before. The finding has the losing in the background, the returning has the leaving under its cloak. Looking at the tender and joy-filled return, I have to dare to taste the sorrowful events that preceded it. Only when I have the courage to explore in depth what it means to leave home, can I come to a true understanding of the return. The soft yellow-brown of the son's underclothes looks beautiful when seen in rich harmony with the red of the father's cloak, but the truth of the matter is that the son is dressed in rags that betray the great misery that lies behind him. In the context of a compassionate embrace, our brokenness may appear beautiful, but our brokenness has no other beauty but the beauty that comes from the compassion that surrounds it.

To understand deeply the mystery of compassion, I have to look honestly at the reality that evokes it. The fact is that, long before turning and returning, the son left. He said to his father, "Let me have the share of the estate that will come to me," then he got together everything he had received and left. The evangelist Luke tells it all so simply and so matter-of-factly that it is difficult to realize fully that what is happening here is an unheard-of event: hurtful, offensive, and in radical contradiction to the most venerated tradition of the time. Kenneth Bailey, in his penetrating explanation of Luke's story, shows that the son's manner of leaving is tantamount to wishing his father dead. Bailey writes:

For over fifteen years I have been asking people of all walks of life from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan about the implications of a son's request for his inheritance while the father is still living. The answer has always been emphatically the same. The conversation runs as follows:

Has anyone ever made such a request in your village? Never!

Could anyone ever make such a request? Impossible!

If anyone ever did, what would happen? His father would beat him, of course!

Why? The request means-he wants his father to die.

Bailey explains that the son asks not only for the division of the inheritance, but also for the right to dispose of his part. "After signing over his possessions to his son, the father still has the right to live off the proceeds… as long as he is alive. Here the younger son gets, and thus is assumed to have demanded, disposition to which, even more explicitly, he has no right until the death of his father. The implication of 'Father, I cannot wait for you to die' underlies both requests."

The son's "leaving" is, therefore, a much more offensive act than it seems at first reading. It is a heartless rejection of the home in which the son was born and nurtured and a break with the most precious tradition carefully upheld by the larger community of which he was a part. When Luke writes, "and left for a distant country," he indicates much more than the desire of a young man to see more of the world. He speaks about a drastic cutting loose from the way of living, thinking, and acting that has been handed down to him from generation to generation as a sacred legacy. More than disrespect, it is a betrayal of the treasured values of family and community. The "distant country" is the world in which everything considered holy at home is disregarded.

This explanation is significant to me, not only because it provides me with an accurate understanding of the parable in its historical context, but also - and most of all - because it summons me to recognize the younger son in myself. At first it seemed hard to discover in my own life's journey such a defiant rebellion. Rejecting the values of my own heritage is not part of the way I think of myself. But when I look carefully at the many more or less subtle ways I have

preferred the distant country to the home dose by, the younger son quickly emerges. I am speaking here about a spiritual "leaving home" as quite distinct from the mere physical fact that I have spent most of my years outside my beloved Holland.

More than any other story in the Gospel, the parable of the prodigal son expresses the boundlessness of God's compassionate love. And when I place myself in that story under the light of that divine love, it becomes painfully clear that leaving home is much closer to my spiritual experience than I might have thought.

Rembrandt's painting of the father welcoming his son displays scarcely any external movement. In contrast to his 1636 etching of the prodigal son - full of action, the father running to the son and the son throwing himself at his father's feet - the Hermitage painting, made about thirty years later, is one of utter stillness. The father's touching the son is an everlasting blessing; the son resting against his father's breast is an eternal peace. Christian Tümpel writes: "The moment of receiving and forgiving in the stillness of its composition lasts without end. The movement of the father and the son speaks of something that passes not, but lasts forever." Jacob Rosenberg summarizes this vision beautifully when he writes: "The group of father and son is outwardly almost motionless, but inwardly all the more moved… the story deals not with the human love of an earthly father... what is meant and represented here is the divine love and mercy in its power to transform death into life."

Deaf to the Voice of Love

Leaving home is, then, much more than an historical event bound to time and place. It is a denial of the spiritual reality that I belong to God with every part of my being, that God holds me safe in an eternal embrace, that I am indeed carved in the palms of God's hands and hidden in their shadows. Leaving home means ignoring the truth that God has "fashioned me in secret, moulded me in the depths of the earth and knitted me together in my mother's womb." Leaving home is living as though I do not yet have a home and must look far and wide to find one.

Home is the center of my being where I can hear the voice that says: "You are my Beloved, on you my favour rests" - the same voice that gave life to the first Adam and spoke to Jesus, the second Adam; the same voice that speaks to all the children of God and sets them free to live in the midst of a dark world while remaining in the light.

I have heard that voice. It has spoken to me in the past and continues to speak to me now. It is the never-interrupted voice of love speaking from eternity and giving life and love whenever it is heard. When I hear that voice, I know that I am home with God and have nothing to fear. As the Beloved of my heavenly Father, "1 can walk in the valley of darkness: no evil would I fear." As the Beloved, I can "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out devils." Having "received without charge," I can "give without charge." As the Beloved, I can confront, console, admonish, and encourage without fear of rejection or need for affirmation. As the Beloved, I can suffer persecution without desire for revenge and receive praise without using it as a proof of my goodness. As the Beloved, I can be tortured and killed without ever having to doubt that the love that is given to me is stronger than death. As the Beloved, I am free to live and give life, free also to die while giving life.

Jesus has made it dear to me that the same voice that he heard at the River Jordan and on Mount Tabor can also be heard by me. He has made it clear to me that just as he has his home with the Father, so do I. Praying to his Father for his disciples, he says: "They do not belong to the world, any more than I belong to the world. Consecrate them [set them aside) in the truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world, and for their sake I consecrate myself so that they too may be consecrated in truth." These words reveal my true dwelling place, my true abode, my true home. Faith is the radical trust that home has always been there and always will be there. The somewhat stiff hands of the father rest on the prodigal's shoulders with the everlasting divine blessing: "You are my Beloved, on you my favour rests."

Yet over and over again I have left home. I have fled the hands of blessing and run off to faraway places searching for love! This is the great tragedy of my life and of the lives of so many I meet on my journey. Somehow I have become deaf to the voice that calls me the Beloved, have left the only place where I can hear that voice, and have gone off desperately hoping that I would find somewhere else what I could no longer find at home.

At first this sounds simply unbelievable. Why should I leave the place where all I need to hear can be heard? The more I think about this question, the more I realize that the true voice of love is a very soft and gentle voice speaking to me in the most hidden places of my being. It is not a boisterous voice, forcing itself on me and demanding attention. It is the voice of a nearly blind father who has cried much and died many deaths. It is a voice that can only be heard by those who allow themselves to be touched.

Sensing the touch of God's blessing hands and hearing the voice calling me the Beloved are one and the same. This became clear to the prophet Elijah. Elijah was standing on the mountain to meet God. First there came a hurricane, but God was not in the hurricane. Then there came an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. Then followed a fire, but God was not there either. Finally there came something very tender, called by some a soft breeze and by others a small voice. When Elijah sensed this, he covered his face because he knew that God was present. In the tenderness of God, voice was touch and touch was voice.

But there are many other voices, voices that are loud, full of promises and very seductive. These voices say, "Go out and prove that you are worth something." Soon after Jesus had heard the voice calling him the Beloved, he was led to the desert to hear those other voices. They told him to prove that he was worth love in being successful, popular, and powerful. Those same voices are not unfamiliar to me. They are always there and, always, they reach into those inner places where I question my own goodness and doubt my self-worth. They suggest that I am not going to be loved without my having earned it through determined efforts and hard work. They want me to prove to myself and others that I am worth being loved, and they keep pushing me to do everything possible to gain acceptance. They deny loudly that love is a totally free gift. I leave home every time. I lose faith in the voice that calls me the Beloved and follow the voices that offer a great variety of ways to win the love I so much desire.

Almost from the moment I had ears to hear, I heard those voices, and they have stayed with me ever since. They have come to me through my parents, my friends, my teachers, and my colleagues, but, most of all, they have come and still come through the mass media that surround me. And they say: "Show me that you are a good boy. You had better be better than your friend! How are your grades? Be sure you can make it through school! I sure hope you are going to make it on your own! What are your connections? Are you sure you want to be friends with those people? These trophies certainly show how good a player you were! Don't show your weakness, you'll be used! Have you made all the arrangements for your old age? When you stop being productive, people lose interest in you! When you are dead, you are dead!"

As long as I remain in touch with the voice that calls me the Beloved, these questions and counsels are quite harmless. Parents, friends, and teachers, even those who speak to me through the media, are mostly very sincere in their concerns. Their warnings and advice are well intended. In fact, they can be limited human expressions of an unlimited divine love. But when I forget that voice of the first unconditional love, then these innocent suggestions can easily start dominating my life and pull me into the "distant country." It is not very hard for me to know when this is happening. Anger, resentment, jealousy, desire for revenge, lust, greed, antagonisms, and rivalries are the obvious signs that I have left home. And that happens quite easily. When I pay careful attention to what goes on in my mind from moment to moment, I come to the disconcerting discovery that there are very few moments during my day when I am really free from these dark emotions, passions, and feelings.

Constantly falling back into an old trap, before I am even fully aware of it, I find myself wondering why someone hurt me, rejected me, or didn't pay attention to me. Without realizing it, I find myself brooding about someone else's success, my own loneliness, and the way the world

abuses me. Despite my conscious intentions, I often catch myself daydreaming about becoming rich, powerful, and very famous. All of these mental games reveal to me the fragility of my faith that I am the Beloved One on whom God's favour rests. I am so afraid of being disliked, blamed, put aside, passed over, ignored, persecuted, and killed, that I am constantly developing strategies to defend myself and thereby assure myself of the love I think I need and deserve. And in so doing I move far away from my father's home and choose to dwell in a "distant country."

Searching Where It Cannot Be Found

At issue here is the question: "To whom do I belong? To God or to the world?" Many of my daily preoccupations suggest that I belong more to the world than to God. A little criticism makes me angry, and a little rejection makes me depressed. A little praise raises my spirits, and a little success excites me. It takes very little to raise me up or thrust me down. Often I am like a small boat on the ocean, completely at the mercy of its waves. All the time and energy I spend in keeping some kind of balance and preventing myself from being tipped over and drowning shows that my life is mostly a struggle for survival: not a holy struggle, but an anxious struggle resulting from the mistaken idea that it is the world that defines me.

As long as I keep running about asking: "Do you love me? Do you really love me?" I give all power to the voices of the world and put myself in bondage because the world is filled with "ifs." The world says: "Yes, I love you *if* you are good-looking, intelligent, and wealthy. I love you *if* you have a good education, a good job, and good connections. I love you *if* you produce much, sell much, and buy much." There are endless "ifs" hidden in the world's love. These "ifs" enslave me, since it is impossible to respond adequately to all of them. The world's love is and always will be conditional. As long as I keep looking for my true self in the world of conditional love, I will remain "hooked" to the world-trying, failing, and trying again. It is a world that fosters addictions because what it offers cannot satisfy the deepest craving of my heart.

"Addiction" might be the best word to explain the lostness that so deeply permeates contemporary society. Our addictions make us cling to what the world proclaims as the keys to self-fulfilment: accumulation of wealth and power; attainment of status and admiration; lavish consumption of food and drink, and sexual gratification without distinguishing between lust and love. These addictions create expectations that cannot but fail to satisfy our deepest needs. As long as we live within the world's delusions, our addictions condemn us to futile quests in "the distant country," leaving us to face an endless series of disillusionments while our sense of self remains unfulfilled. In these days of increasing addictions, we have wandered far away from our Father's home. The addicted life can aptly be designated a life lived in "a distant country." It is from there that our cry for deliverance rises up.

I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found. Why do I keep ignoring the place of true love and persist in looking for it elsewhere? Why do I keep leaving home where I am called a child of God, the Beloved of my Father? I am constantly surprised at how I keep taking the gifts God has given me-my health, my intellectual and emotional gifts-and keep using them to impress people, receive affirmation and praise, and compete for rewards, instead of developing them for the glory of God. Yes, I often carry them off to a "distant country" and put them in the service of an exploiting world that does not know their true value. It's almost as if I want to prove to myself and to my world that I do not need God's love, that I can make a life on my own, that I want to be fully independent. Beneath it all is the great rebellion, the radical "No" to the Father's love, the unspoken curse: "I wish you were dead." The prodigal son's "No" reflects Adam's original rebellion: his rejection of the God in whose love we are created and by whose love we are sustained. It is the rebellion that places me outside the garden, out of reach of the tree of life. It is the rebellion that makes me dissipate myself in a "distant country."

Looking again at Rembrandt's portrayal of the return of the younger son, I now see how much more is taking place than a mere compassionate gesture toward a wayward child. The great event I see is the end of the great rebellion. The rebellion of Adam and all his descendants is

forgiven, and the original blessing by which Adam received everlasting life is restored. It seems to me now that these hands have always been stretched out-even when there were no shoulders upon which to rest them. God has never pulled back his arms, never withheld his blessing, never stopped considering his son the Beloved One. But the Father couldn't compel his son to stay home. He couldn't force his love on the Beloved. He had to let him go in freedom, even though he knew the pain it would cause both his son and himself. It was love itself that prevented him from keeping his son home at all cost. It was love itself that allowed him to let his son find his own life, even with the risk of losing it.

Here the mystery of my life is unveiled. I am loved so much that I am left free to leave home. The blessing is there from the beginning. I have left it and keep on leaving it. But the Father is always looking for me with outstretched arms to receive me back and whisper again in my ear: "You are my Beloved, on you my favour rests. "

THE YOUNGER SON'S RETURN

He squandered his money on a life of debauchery. When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch; so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled himself with the husks the pigs were eating, but no one would let him have them. Then he came to his senses and said, "Row many of my father's hired men have all the food they want and more, and here am I dying of hunger I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men." So he left the place and went back to his father.

Being Lost

The young man held and blessed by the father is a poor, a very poor, man. He left home with much pride and money, determined to live his own life far away from his father and his community. He returns with nothing: his money, his health, his honour, his self-respect, his reputation… everything has been squandered.

Rembrandt leaves little doubt about his condition. His head is shaven. No longer the long curly hair with which Rembrandt had painted himself as the proud, defiant prodigal son in the brothel. The head is that of a prisoner whose name has been replaced by a number. When a man's hair is shaved off, whether in prison or in the army, in a hazing ritual or in a concentration camp, he is robbed of one of the marks of his individuality. The clothes Rembrandt gives him are underclothes, barely covering his emaciated body. The father and the tall man observing the scene wear wide red cloaks, giving them status and dignity. The kneeling son has no cloak. The yellow-brown, torn undergarment just covers his exhausted, worn-out body from which all strength is gone. The soles of his feet tell the story of a long and humiliating journey. The left foot, slipped out of its worn sandal, is scarred. The right foot, only partially covered by a broken sandal, also speaks of suffering and misery. This is a man dispossessed of everything… except for one thing, his sword. The only remaining sign of dignity is the short sword hanging from his hips - the badge of his nobility. Even in the midst of his debasement, he had clung to the truth that he still was the son of his father. Otherwise, he would have sold his so valuable sword, the symbol of his sonship. The sword is there to show me that, although he came back speaking as a beggar and an outcast, he had not forgotten that he still was the son of his father. It was this remembered and valued sonship that finally persuaded him to turn back.

I see before me a man who went deep into a foreign land and lost everything he took with him. I see emptiness, humiliation, and defeat. He who was so much like his father now looks worse than his father's servants. He has become like a slave.

What happened to the son in the distant country? Aside from all the material and physical consequences, what were the inner consequences of the son's leaving home? The sequence of

events is quite predictable. The farther I run away from the place where God dwells, the less I am able to hear the voice that calls me the Beloved, and the less I hear that voice, the more entangled I become in the manipulations and power games of the world.

It goes somewhat like this: I am not so sure anymore that I have a safe home, and I observe other people who seem to be better off than I. I wonder how I can get to where they are. I try hard to please, to achieve success, to be recognized. When I fail, I feel jealous or resentful of these others. When I succeed, I worry that others will be jealous or resentful of me. I become suspicious or defensive and increasingly afraid that I won't get what I so much desire or will lose what I already have. Caught in this tangle of needs and wants, I no longer know my own motivations. I feel victimized by my surroundings and distrustful of what others are doing or saying. Always on my guard, I lose my inner freedom and start dividing the world into those who are for me and those who are against me. I wonder if anyone really cares. I start looking for validations of my distrust. And wherever I go, I see them, and I say: "No one can be trusted." And then I wonder whether anyone ever really loved me. The world around me becomes dark. My heart grows heavy. My body is filled with sorrows. My life loses meaning. I have become a lost soul.

The younger son became fully aware of how lost he was when no one in his surroundings showed the slightest interest in him. They noticed him only as long as he could be used for their purposes. But when he had no money left to spend and no gifts left to give, he stopped existing for them. It is hard for me to imagine what it means to be a complete foreigner, a person to whom no one shows any sign of recognition. Real loneliness comes when we have lost all sense of having things in common. When no one wanted to give him the food he was giving to the pigs, the younger son realized that he wasn't even considered a fellow human being. I am only partially aware of how much I rely on some degree of acceptance. Common background, history, vision, religion, and education; common relationships, life-styles, and customs; common age and profession; all of these can serve as bases for acceptance. Whenever I meet a new person, I always look for something we have in common. That seems a normal, spontaneous reaction. When I say, "I am from Holland," the response is often: "Oh, I have been there," or "I have a friend there," or "Oh, windmills, tulips, and wooden shoes!"

Whatever the reaction, there is always a mutual search for a common link. The less we have in common, the harder it is to be together and the more estranged we fee! When I know neither the language nor the customs of others, when I do not understand their life-style or religion, their rituals or their art, when I do not know their food and manner of eating… then I feel even more foreign and lost.

When the younger son was no longer considered a human being by the people around him, he felt the profundity of his isolation, the deepest loneliness one can experience. He was truly lost, and it was this complete lostness that brought him to his senses. He was shocked into the awareness of his utter alienation and suddenly understood that he had embarked on the road to death. He had become so disconnected from what gives life-family, friends, community, acquaintances, and even food-that he realized that death would be the natural next step. All at once he saw clearly the path he had chosen and where it would lead him; he understood his own death choice; and he knew that one more step in the direction he was going would take him to self-destruction.

In that critical moment, what was it that allowed him to opt for life? It was the rediscovery of his deepest self.

Claiming Childhood

Whatever he had lost, be it his money, his friends, his reputation, his self-respect, his inner joy and peace-one or all-he still remained his father's child. And so he says to himself: "How many of my father's hired men have all the food they want and more, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men."

With these words in his heart, he was able to turn, to leave the foreign country, and go home.

The meaning of the younger son's return is succinctly expressed in the words: "Father… I no longer deserve to be called your son." On the one hand the younger son realizes that he has lost the dignity of his sonship, but at the same time that sense of lost dignity makes him also aware that he is indeed the *son* who had dignity to lose.

The younger son's return takes place in the very moment that he reclaims his sonship, even though he has lost all the dignity that belongs to it. In fact, it was the loss of everything that brought him to the bottom line of his identity. He hit the bedrock of his sonship. In retrospect, it seems that the prodigal had to lose everything to come into touch with the ground of his being. When he found himself desiring to be treated as one of the pigs, he realized that he was not a pig but a human being, a son of his father. This realization became the basis for his choice to live instead of to die. Once he had come again in touch with the truth of his sonship, he could hear - although faintly - the voice calling him the Beloved and feel - although distantly - the touch of blessing. This awareness of and confidence in his father's love, misty as it may have been, gave him the strength to claim for himself his sonship, even though that claim could not be based on any merit.

A few years ago, I, myself, was very concretely confronted with the choice: to return or not to return. A friendship that at first seemed promising and life-giving gradually pulled me farther and farther away from home until I finally found myself completely obsessed by it. In a spiritual sense, I found myself squandering all I had been given by my father to keep the friendship alive. I couldn't pray any longer. I had lost interest in my work and found it increasingly hard to pay attention to other people's concerns. As much as I realized how self-destructive my thoughts and actions were, I kept being drawn by my love-hungry heart to deceptive ways of gaining a sense of self-worth.

Then, when finally the friendship broke down completely, I had to choose between destroying myself or trusting that the love I was looking for did, in fact, exist… back home! A voice, weak as it seemed, whispered that no human being would ever be able to give me the love I craved, that no friendship, no intimate relationship, no community would ever be able to satisfy the deepest needs of my wayward heart. That soft but persistent voice spoke to me about my vocation, my early commitments, the many gifts I had received in my father's house. That voice called me "son."

The anguish of abandonment was so biting that it was hard, almost impossible, to believe that voice. But friends, seeing my despair, kept urging me to step over my anguish and to trust that there was someone waiting for me at home. Finally, I chose for containment instead of more dissipation and went to a place where I could be alone. There, in my solitude, I started to walk home slowly and hesitantly, hearing ever more clearly the voice that says: "You are my Beloved, on you my favour rests."

This painful, yet hopeful, experience brought me to the core of the spiritual struggle for the right choice. God says: "I am offering you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then, so that you . . . may live in the love of Yahweh your God, obeying his voice, holding fast to him." Indeed, it is a question of life or death. Do we accept the rejection of the world that imprisons us, or do we claim the freedom of the children of God? *We* must choose.

Judas betrayed *Jesus.* Peter denied him. Both were lost children. Judas, no longer able to hold on to the truth that he remained God's child, hung himself In terms of the prodigal son, he sold the sword of his sonship. Peter, in the midst of his despair, claimed it and returned with many tears. Judas chose death. Peter chose life. I realize that this choice is always before me. Constantly I am tempted to wallow in my own lostness and lose touch with my original goodness, my God-given humanity, my basic blessedness, and thus allow the powers of death to take charge. This happens over and over again whenever I say to myself: "I am no good. I am useless. I am worthless. I am unlovable. I am a nobody." There are always countless events and situations that I can single out to convince myself and others that my life is just not worth living, that I am only a burden, a problem, a source of conflict, or an exploiter of other people's time and energy. Many people live with this dark, inner sense of themselves. In contrast to the prodigal, they let the darkness absorb them so completely that there is no light left to turn toward and return to. They might not kill themselves

physically, but spiritually they are no longer alive. They have given up faith in their original goodness and, thus, also in their Father who has given them their humanity.

But. when God created man and woman in his own image, he saw that "it was very good," and, despite the dark voices, no man or woman can ever change that.

The choice for my own sonship, however, is not an easy one. The dark voices of my surrounding world try to persuade me that I am no good and that I can only become good by earning my goodness through "making it" up the ladder of success. These voices lead me quickly to forget the voice that calls me "my son, the Beloved," reminding me of my being loved independently of any acclaim or accomplishment. These dark voices drown out that gentle, soft, light-giving voice that keeps calling me "my favourite one"; they drag me to the periphery of my existence and make me doubt that there is a loving God waiting for me at the very center of my being.

But leaving the foreign country is only the beginning. The way home is long and arduous. What to do on the way back to the Father? It is very clear what the prodigal son does. He prepares a scenario. As he turned, remembering his sonship, he said to himself: "I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men." As I read these words, I am keenly aware of how full my inner life is with this kind of talk. In fact, I am seldom without some imaginary encounter in my head in which I explain myself, boast or apologize, proclaim or defend, evoke praise or pity. It seems that I am perpetually involved in long dialogues with absent partners, anticipating their questions and preparing my responses. I am amazed by the emotional energy that goes into these inner ruminations and murmurings. Yes, I am leaving the foreign country. Yes, I *am* going home. . . but why all this preparation of speeches which will never be delivered?

The reason is dear. Although claiming my true identity as a child of God, I still live as though the God to whom I am returning demands an explanation. I still think about his love as conditional and about home as a place I am not yet fully sure of. While walking home, I keep entertaining doubts about whether I will be truly welcome when I get there. fu I look at my spiritual journey, my long and fatiguing trip home, I see how full it is of guilt about the past and worries about the future. I realize my failures and know that I have lost the dignity of my sonship, but I am not yet able to fully believe that where my failings are great, "grace is always greater." Still dinging to my sense of worthlessness, I project for myself a place far below that which belongs to the son. Belief in total, absolute forgiveness does not come readily. My human experience tells me that forgiveness boils down to the willingness of the other to forgo revenge and to show me some measure of charity.

The Long Way Home

The prodigal's return is full of ambiguities. He is travelling in the right direction, but what confusion! He admits that he was unable to make it on his own and confesses that he would get better treatment as a slave in his father's home than as an outcast in a foreign land, but he is still far from trusting his father's love. He knows that he is still the son, but tells himself that he has lost the dignity to be called "son," and he prepares himself to accept the status of a "hired man" so that he will at least survive. There is repentance, but not a repentance in the light of the immense love of a forgiving God. It is a self-serving repentance that offers the possibility of survival. I know this state of mind and heart quite well. It is like saying: "Well, I couldn't make it on my own, I have to acknowledge that God is the only resource left to me. I will go to God and ask for forgiveness in the hope that I will receive a minimal punishment and be allowed to survive on the condition of hard labour." God remains a harsh, judgmental God. It is this God who makes me feel guilty and worried and calls up in me all these self-serving apologies. Submission to this God does not create true inner freedom, but breeds only bitterness and resentment.

One of the greatest challenges of the spiritual life is to receive God's forgiveness. There is something in us humans that keeps us dinging to our sins and prevents us from letting God erase our past and offer us a completely new beginning. Sometimes it even seems as though I want to prove to God that my darkness is too great to overcome. While God wants to restore me to the full

dignity of sonship, I keep insisting that I will settle for being a hired servant. But do I truly want to be restored to the full responsibility of the son? Do I truly want to be so totally forgiven that a completely new way of living becomes possible? Do I trust myself and such a radical reclamation? Do I want to break away from my deep-rooted rebellion against God and surrender myself so absolutely to God's love that a new person can emerge? Receiving forgiveness requires a total willingness to let God be God and do all the healing, restoring, and renewing. As long as I want to do even a part of that myself, I end up with partial solutions, such as becoming a hired servant. As a hired servant, I can still keep my distance, still revolt, reject, strike, run away, or complain about my pay. As the beloved son, I have to claim my full dignity and begin preparing myself to become the father.

It is clear that the distance between the turning around and the arrival at home needs to be travelled wisely and with discipline. The discipline is that of becoming a child of God. Jesus makes it dear that the way to God is the same as the way to a new childhood. "Unless you turn and become like little children you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven." Jesus does not ask me to remain a child but to become one. Becoming a child is living toward a second innocence: not the innocence of the newborn infant, but the innocence that is reached through conscious choices.

How can those who have come to this second childhood, this second innocence, be described? Jesus does this very clearly in the Beatitudes. Shortly after hearing the voice calling him the Beloved, and soon after rejecting Satan's voice daring him to prove to the world that he is worth being loved, he begins his public ministry. One of his first steps is to call disciples to follow him and share in his ministry. Then Jesus goes up onto the mountain, gathers his disciples around him, and says: "How blessed are the poor, the gentle, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for uprightness, the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted in the cause of uprightness."

These words present a portrait of the child of God. It is a self-portrait of Jesus, the Beloved Son. It is also a portrait of me as I must be. The Beatitudes offer me the simplest route for the journey home, back into the house of my Father. And along this route I will discover the joys of the second childhood: comfort, mercy, and an ever clearer vision of God. And as I reach home and feel the embrace of my Father, I will realize that not only heaven will be mine to claim, but that the earth as well will become my inheritance, a place where I can live in freedom without obsessions and compulsions.

Becoming a child is living the Beatitudes and so finding the narrow gate into the Kingdom. Did Rembrandt know about this? I don't know whether the parable leads me to see new aspects of his painting, or whether his painting leads me to discover new aspects of the parable. But looking at the head of the boy-come-home, .J can see the second childhood portrayed.

I vividly remember showing the Rembrandt painting to friends and asking them what they saw. One of them, a young woman, stood up, walked to the large print of the *Prodigal Son,* and put her hand on the head of the younger son. Then she said, "This is the head of a baby who just came out of his mother's womb. Look, it is still wet, and the face is still foetus-like." All of us who were present saw suddenly what she saw. Was Rembrandt portraying not simply the return to the Father, but also the return to the womb of God who is Mother as well as Father?

Until then I had thought of the shaved head of the boy as the head of someone who had been a prisoner, or lived in a concentration camp. I had thought of his face as the emaciated face of an ill-treated hostage. And that may still be all that Rembrandt wanted to show. But since that meeting with my friends, it is no longer possible for me to look at his painting without seeing there a little baby re-entering the mother's womb. This helps me to understand more dearly the road I am to walk on my way home.

Isn't the little child poor, gentle, and pure of heart? Isn't the little child weeping in response to every little pain? Isn't the little child the peacemaker hungry and thirsty for uprightness and the final victim of persecution? And what of Jesus himself, the Word of God who became flesh, dwelt

for nine months in Mary's womb, and came into this world as a little child worshipped by shepherds from dose by and by wise men from far away? The eternal Son became a child so that I might become a child again and so re-enter with him into the Kingdom of the Father. "In all truth I tell you," Jesus said to Nicodemus, "no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above."

The True Prodigal

I am touching here the mystery that Jesus himself became the prodigal son for our sake. He left the house of his heavenly Father, came to a foreign country, gave away all that he had, and returned through his cross to his Father's home. All of this he did, not as a rebellious son, but as the obedient son, sent out to bring home all the lost children of God. Jesus, who told the story to those who criticized him for associating with sinners, himself lived the long and painful journey that he describes.

When I began to reflect on the parable and Rembrandt's portrayal of it, I never thought of the exhausted young man with the face of a newborn baby as Jesus. But now, after so many hours of intimate contemplation, I feel blessed by this vision. Isn't the broken young man kneeling before his father the "lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world"? Isn't he the innocent one who became sin for us? Isn't he the one who didn't "cling to his equality with God," but "became as human beings are"? Isn't he the sinless Son of God who cried out on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus is the prodigal son of the prodigal Father who gave away everything the Father had entrusted to him so that I could become like him and return with him to his Father's home.

Seeing Jesus himself as the prodigal son goes far beyond the traditional interpretation of the parable. Nonetheless, this vision holds a great secret. I am gradually discovering what it means to say that my sonship and the sonship of Jesus are one, that my return and the return of Jesus are one, that my home and the home of Jesus are one. There is no journey to God outside of the journey that Jesus made. The one who told the story of the prodigal son is the Word of God, "through whom all things came into being." He "became flesh, lived among us," and made us part of his fullness.

Once I look at the story of the prodigal son with the eyes of faith, the "return" of the prodigal becomes the return of the Son of God who has drawn all people into himself and brings them home to his heavenly Father. As Paul says: "God wanted all fullness to be found in him and through him to reconcile all things to him, everything in heaven and everything on earth."

Frère Pierre Marie, the founder of the Fraternity of Jerusalem, a community of monks living in the city, reflects on Jesus as the prodigal son in a very poetic and biblical way. He writes:

He, who is born not from human stock, or human desire or human will, but from God himself, one day took to himself everything that was under his footstool and he left with his inheritance, his title of Son, and the whole ransom price. He left for a far country… the faraway land… where he became as human beings are and emptied himself His own people did not accept him and his first bed was a bed of straw! Like a root in arid ground, he grew up before us, he was despised, the lowest of men, before whom one covers his face. Very soon, he came to know exile, hostility, loneliness... After having given away everything in a life of bounty, his worth, his peace, his light, his truth, his life… all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom and the hidden mystery kept secret for endless ages; after having lost himself among the lost children of the house of Israel, spending his time with the sick (and not with the well-to-do), with the sinners (and not with the just), and even with the prostitutes to whom he promised entrance into the Kingdom of his Father; after having been treated as a glutton and a drunkard, as a friend of tax collectors and sinners, as a Samaritan, a possessed, a blasphemer; after having offered everything, even his body and his blood; after having felt deeply in himself sadness, anguish, and a troubled soul; after having gone to the bottom of despair, with which he voluntarily dressed himself as being abandoned by his Father far away from the source of living water, he cried out from the cross on which he was nailed: "I am thirsty." He was laid to rest in the dust and the shadow of death. And there, on the third day, he rose

up from the depths of hell to where he had descended, burdened with the crimes of us all, he bore our sins, our sorrows he carried. Standing straight, he cried out: "Yes, I am ascending to my Father, and your Father, to my God, and your God." And he re-ascended to heaven. Then in the silence, looking at his Son and all his children, since his Son had become all in all, the Father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet; let us eat and celebrate! Because my children who, as you know, were dead have returned to life; they were lost and have been found again! My prodigal Son has brought them all back." They all began to have a feast dressed in their long robes, washed white in the blood of the Lamb.

Looking again at Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son,* I see him now in a new way. I see him as Jesus returning to his Father and my Father, his God and my God.

It is unlikely that Rembrandt himself ever thought of the prodigal son in this way. This understanding was not a customary part of the preaching and writing of his time. Nevertheless, to see in this tired, broken young man the person of Jesus himself brings much comfort and consolation. The young man being embraced by the Father is no longer just one repentant sinner, but the whole of humanity returning to God. The broken body of the prodigal becomes the broken body of humanity, and the baby-like face of the returning child becomes the face of all suffering people longing to re-enter the lost paradise. Thus Rembrandt's painting becomes more than the mere portrayal of a moving parable. It becomes the summary of the history of our salvation. The light surrounding both Father and Son now speaks of the glory that awaits the children of God. It calls to mind the majestic words of John: "…we are already God's children, but what we shall be in the future has not yet been revealed. We are well aware that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he really is."

But neither Rembrandt's painting nor the parable it depicts leaves us in a state of ecstasy. When I saw the central scene of the father embracing his returning son on the poster in Simone's office, I was not yet aware of the four bystanders watching the scene. But now I know the faces of those surrounding the "return." They are enigmatic to say the least, especially that of the tall man standing at the right side of the painting. Yes, there is beauty, glory, salvation… but there are also the critical eyes of uncommitted onlookers. They add a restraining note to the painting and prevent any notions of a quick, romantic solution to the question of spiritual reconciliation. The journey of the younger son cannot be separated from that of his elder brother. And so it is to him that I now-with some temerity-turn my attention.