Remembering the Amish

And I have seen them coming home on summer
nights
Or bent above the washbowl in the kitchen,
Haloed in the window by the low sun's leaving;
Soft voices in the fields of gentle men with horses.

And in the town they walk their own way,
As though a reverence for what lies beneath their
feet
Is in their shoes, and in their eyes a peace
No man may buy and few have ever found.

And sometimes when I meet them I feel like him
who went
With all his father's wealth and lived in laughter far
away
And woke one day to find he'd nothing left.
I feel like turning just like him for home -

That I may also start again.

GOSPEL

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke 15: 11-32

The lost son (the 'prodigal') and the dutiful son

He also said, 'A man had two sons. The younger said to his father, "Father, let me have the share of the estate that would 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 his belly with the husks the pigs were eating but no one offered him anything. Then he came to his senses and said, "How many of my father's paid servants have more food than they want, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave is 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 paid servants." So he left the place and went back to his father. 'While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly. Then his son said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son." But 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. Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we are going to have a feast, a celebration, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found." And they began to celebrate. 'Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about. "Your brother has come" replied the servant "and your father has killed the calf we had fattened because he has got him back safe and sound." He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out to plead with him; but he answered his father, "Look, all these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed your orders, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property - he and his women - you kill the calf we had been fattening." The father said, "My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found."

This is the Gospel of the Lord

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This is the Gospel of the Lord

the first time, I was caught by his young & beautiful body,
by the shyness in his manner,
as he lay in my arms afterwards, resting.

the second time, I noticed his accent.
A stranger travelling far from home.

The third time he came to see me with hunger in his eyes
& a silent desperation in the silent thrustings of his body.

The fourth time he cried like a baby missing its mother,
& I rocked him wordlessly.
He didn't want the sex so much as the nearness of my flesh.

The fifth time he started talking & didn't stop until he'd told me the whole sad tale.
I told him "swallow your pride, go home, back where you belong.
They'll be glad to see you, believe me."

So I sent him from me back to his own gods,
the arms of his father, his brothers chastisement and his farm.

I was sadder than I knew to see him go.
Not for his body, though, God knows, I'd come to love its contours & its sighs.
It was for his friendship & trust I missed him,
& it's the memory of these that still lingers,
long after the shape of his face has begun to fade.

[the Prostitutes story ; Luke 15;11-32]

Tomorrow evening I begin a weekend with 15 retreatants looking into the story of the Prodigal Son, & in reading & reflection for it earlier this week, I discovered the word "misery" fittingly describes the potentially mortal sin of the elder brother..St Faustina Kowalska, a 20th cent mystic lived in Poland between the two World Wars; she logged her mystical experiences in a spiritual diary she kept for 4yrs. She thought she had given everything to Christ: her will, her heart, her self. But, he told her, there was one thing she was keeping back, the only thing she owned exclusively: her misery. When she gradually understood this, her soul was illuminated & she saw its abyss. Misery, which germinates within us all, is innately godless. A writer Sally Read tells "we're often very possessive of our misery-we think only we can control it. We often think nothing else could help us with our pessimism, our festering grudges, our loneliness, our sadness & our grief. We daren't let go of our addictions, our lies, our infidelities, our dubious wars, because, perversely, we think they will tame our suffering. But what Christ showed Faustina was that when we give up misery, his grace fills that immense void that it occupied, & this exchange, though hair-raising, seemingly death-defying at times, signifies our being filled with God, & becoming Christ-like. We conform to his will because we are filled by him."..a powerful insight..this letting go of misery seems to resonate with Jesus' own human moments of misery in Gethsemane when he felt he'd lost everything & everyone; in despair on his knees he prayed "Father, take this cup of suffering from me" he had nothing left, spent exhausted hopeless & miserable..& then, having self emptied [now termed his kenosis] the immense void saw an exchange of misery for the realisation that suffering with God, letting his mercy in, is no longer destructive but transformative..& Jesus' prayer became:"but let it be as you, not I, would have it"..exchanging misery for mercy..21yrs ago I led a retreat for 45 students from Nott Univ Catholic Chaplaincy, & on clearing room after they'd left I found a piece of writing composed by one of them..no name..it came to mind & heart again now as I read of St Faustina..her experience & the students sharing a profoundly transformative experience, from misery to mercy..
"at the beginning of this retreat, I wished I were invisible. Invisible, not only so that others couldn't see me but that I could not see myself. I am not at all at ease with myself. Most times I struggle with myself & I am unforgiving & certainly not forgetful about mistakes I have made, things I have said & done, errors in judgement on my part. workaholic? driven? invisible prison of my own making?..the poem on first night & the scripture following day hit a bit too close to home "shield me from the glance that knows"; but something changed over the past 24hrs. I can feel it. I know I smiled today.. that's a miracle as I have a habit of crying myself to sleep. I smiled a genuine smile at others. A visible smile, one that wasn't a front to mask my loneliness & vulnerability. I smiled at the revelation of a Jesus who is every bit as human as I am, who is not in some remote heavenly penthouse but right here with me. I smiled at the idea of a Jesus who withdraws because he might be tired. Being tired sometimes is ok. I don't need to get frustrated with myself. Jesus' humanity means there is hope for me after all. I smiled at the realisation that I do have a role to play; that my human response to divine inspiration & invitation is vital, & will achieve what seems impossible..insurmountable to me right now. I smiled at the fact that I have a value; I am not as worthless as I sometimes think. I smiled with relief at the thought that God's love & acceptance of me are unconditional.. that although I may no longer deserve to be called His child, He'll still be waiting for me to return & will fatten the lamb on my behalf, because He knows..He's confident I'll make my way back home. His confidence gives me confidence & hope. I smiled when the Word became flesh for me these past 24hrs. I smiled to know I am not invisible..that even with my many faults & all the dust in my attic, I am still loved. I am worth something to others. I was reminded that I am God's creation therefore precious. I needed

reminding." The students reflection finished with a short litany of prayer you may wish to adopt..

"thank you for smiling at me; thank you for asking how I am; thank for you for pouring me a cup of tea or coffee; thank you for recognising & remembering me; thank you for seeing me, thank you all for loving me. ..thanks be to God."

[Home Prayers; 15 January 2026]

In Greek, the word "fileo" means the love of friendship, tender but not all-encompassing ..instead the word "agapao" means love without reserve, total & unconditional. Jesus asks Peter the first time;

"Simon, do you love me?" [agapas-me] John 21.15
..with this toal & unconditional love..

Prior to the experience of betrayal, the Apostle certainly would have said "I love you [agapo-me] unconditionally" ..now that he has known the bitter sadness of infidelity, the drama of his own weakness, he says with humility;

"Lord, you know that I love you [filo-se]" that is
"I love you with my poor human love"

Christ insists,
"Simon, do you love me with this total love that I want?"
& Peter repeats the response of his humble human love,
"Kyrie, filo-se".."Lord, I love you as I am able to love you"

The third time Jesus only says to Simon;
"Fileis-me?" .."do you love me?"

Simon understands that his poor love is enough for Jesus, it is the only one of which he is capable; nonetheless he is grieved that the Lord spoke to him in this way. He thus replies;
"Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you [filo-se]"
This is to say that Jesus has put himself on the level of Peter, rather than Peter on Jesus' level! It is exactly this divine conformity that gives hope to the disciple, who experienced the pain of infidelity.
From here is born the trust that makes him able to follow Christ to the end;

"this he said to show by what death he was to glorify God. After this he said to him;
"follow me" [John 21.19]

From the naïve enthusiasm of initial acceptance, passing through the sorrowful experience of denial & the weeping of conversion, Peter succeeded in trusting himself to that Jesus who adapts himself to his poor capacity to love. In this way, he shows us the way, nothwithstanding all of our weaknesses.
We know that Jesus adapts himself to this weakness of ours.

[from "the Apostles" Pope Benedict XVI 2008]

A Parable: Return of the Prodigal Son

Rembrandt Van Rijn

(1606–69)
257 x 197.5 cm.
Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

Artistic Background

Rembrandt painted dozens of self-portraits, all of them revealing an honesty and self-scrutiny of almost unbearable intensity. He also painted 160 biblical themes (in addition to about 700 drawings and etchings) and he brought to them a similar desire to get to the core elements of a narrative or relationship. His use of 'chiaroscuro' (dramatic use of light and dark) heightens the contrasts, for he is able to focus attention on a particular face, gesture or feature. Rembrandt's determination to paint with integrity meant he was the first artist to draw a Jewish Jesus. The biblical characters were real people, but the stories had contemporary relevance (the clogs in this picture make a vital link). Without theatrical gestures or movements he is able to "look straight into the human heart" (Gombrich).

Biblical Background

(Luke 15:11-32)

Jesus told the story of two sons. The younger insisted on being given his inheritance. He then spent it all irresponsibly. When he was starving he came to his senses and decided to go back home to ask to work as a servant. His father however received him with open arms and celebrated his return: "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." The older son took a dim view of the whole episode. He was angry and refused to join in the celebration, for he had stayed at home with his father, working hard, and could not find it in himself to forgive his brother's prodigality.

"Let us have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Reflecting on the Painting

Rembrandt has chosen the pivotal moment of the whole story. The prodigal son kneels down and rests his head against his father. He is dishevelled, his clogs are worn and his clothes are torn. The father enfolds him as he stoops gently and the tilt of his head and the light embrace all demonstrate his understanding and sympathy. His red cloak adds an ecclesiastical symbolism to the welcome, for blood-red is the colour of forgiveness. The son is not only received but forgiven. The relationship between the two could hardly be closer: they form a single unit in the structure of the picture.

But this is not the whole story. To the right stands the older son, straight and unyielding. His staff emphasises judgement and disapproval. His face, deliberately highlighted, is impassive. He is equally distant from father and son.

This distance is further emphasised by the seated figure – a foreman at the farm perhaps, who is obviously intrigued, perhaps even moved, by the father's welcome and the young son's plight. It is he who will be responsible for organising the celebration and it will be hard, if not impossible, to bridge the gulf in the family.

Meanwhile, two shadowy figures appear in the background. One is a woman. The other looks at us. Does he bear a resemblance to Rembrandt himself, or is he the figure of Christ? We don't know, but he is looking at the viewer. His presence involves the viewer and seems to be inviting a comment or response. Perhaps he is asking which of the figures we recognise ourselves in.

One time, Willie and it was Christmastime too, and I was a young fellow in Kiltegan, our dog Shep went missing for some days, as dogs in winter will. I was maybe ten or eleven,

And I loved that Shep, and feared he was gone forever. We had got him as a young dog that had been beaten somewhere, and broken, till he reached our haven, and uncoiled, and learned to bark like a baby learns to laugh, and he shone at his work.

One morning early after a fall of snow I went out to break the ice on the rain-barrel to splash my face, and I saw his tracks in the snow going up the sloping field; high to the fringes of the wood, and I was greatly afeared, because there were drops of blood now and then as he went, little smears of it on the cleanly snow. So I followed him up, sinking here and there in the drifts, well used to it, well used to it, and on a piece of field we called the upper garden, because it was flat there and you could see across to Baltinglass and some said even to Shillelagh and the dark woods of Coollattin, I found our dog there with the carcass of a ewe well-eaten, only the hindquarters remaining. I saw my father's blue sign on the wool and knew the worst. For a dog' that would kill a sheep would die himself. So in my innocence I went down to my father and told him and he instructed me, as was right and proper, to go back up with a rope and lead Shep down so the killing could take place. The loss of a ewe was a disaster, a disaster, there'd be pounds of money gone into her. But I loved the dog so sorely, I hesitated when I had the rope tied about him, and at length led him off further up the hill, across the little stand of scrubby pines, and on into the low wood dark with snow and moss. And we went through by a snaking path I knew, till we got to the other side, where there was a simple man living, that made his living from the rabbits, and maybe had need of a watchful dog. But he wouldn't take a dog that had killed, though he was a tender man enough, and it behoved me to retrace my steps back into the woods, now moving along but slowly, and the dog sort of dragging behind, as if he knew well his misdeed and his fate. And I stopped in the centre of the trees, and do you know my young legs would not go forward, they would not proceed, try as I might, and there I was all afternoon and night with the dog and the hazels. How is it that the drear of winter didn't eat my bones and murder me for my foolishness? Love of the dog kept me standing there, as only a child can stand, without moving, thinking, the poor dog whimpering with the cold. About five 'o clock I went on, because I heard calling over the hill, here and there, and I could see black figures with lights moving and calling; calling out to me and the dog to come home. We came down the sloping field with the neighbours about us, them not saying a word, maybe marveling at me, thinking I had been dead, and the torches and lamps making everything crazy with light, the old crab

apple enlarging to the size of the field, its branches wild like arms. Down at last into the yard we came, the dog skulking on the rope just the same as the day he had arrived to us, and my father came out from the house in his big clothes. All brown with clothes and hair. It was as if I had never seen him before, never looked at him in his entirety, from head to toe. And I knew then that the dog and me were for slaughter. My feet carried me on to where he stood, immortal you would say in the door. And he put his right hand on the back of my head, and pulled me to him so that my cheek rested against the buckle of his belt. And he raised his own face to the brightening sky and praised someone, in a crushed voice, God maybe, for my safety, and stroked my hair. And the dog's crime was never spoken of, but that he lived till he died. And I would call that the mercy of fathers, when the love that lies in them deeply like the glittering face of a well is betrayed by an emergency, and the child sees at last that he is loved, loved and needed and not be lived without, and greatly.

The Steward of Christendom: Act Two (Sebastian Barry)



Eugene Burnand's "Prodigal Father"