Over the years I have read hundreds of books, but of all the ones I have turned to in my desire to know God more deeply none has impacted me as much as ‘The Return of the Prodigal Son’ by Henri Nouwen. I have read and re-read these wonderful pages and through them discovered my true identity as God’s beloved child. When I first encountered the book, in the late 1990s I was searching for a deeper intimacy with God, and Nouwen’s writing pointed me in the right direction. At the heart of the spiritual life is our journey ‘home’, to that place within us where we can hear the voice of Love that says: ’You are my beloved, and my favour rests on you.’

Nouwen’s first encounter with Rembrandt’s painting of The Return of the Prodigal came by ‘chance’. He was in France at the time, staying at the L’Arche community founded by his friend Jean Vanier. There in the administration office he ‘noticed’ a poster on the wall based on the painting and was immediately transfixed. He saw himself as the young man kneeling before the father. ‘I was, indeed, the son exhausted from long travels; I wanted to be embraced; I was looking for a home where I could feel safe. The son-come-home was all I was and all I wanted to be.’ That was the start of a journey which took him to St Petersburg to see the original in The Hermitage museum, and to writing a book about his discovery of his own belovedness that has touched countless people worldwide since its publication in 1992.

The book is more an exposition of Rembrandt’s painting than it is of the famous parable of Jesus in Luke 15:11-32, although the two are deeply connected. As Nouwen meditated on the picture and reflected on the Bible story he experienced a deep inner journey in which he found himself identifying first with the lostness of the younger son, then with the self-righteousness of the older brother, until finally he began to realise that he was called to display the graciousness of the father. This journey forms the structure of the book, and we may say a pattern for the journey that is the Christian life: ‘I am the younger son, I am the elder son, and I am on my way to becoming the father.’

The journey begins with the younger son leaving home for the far country, a decision which Nouwen describes as a ‘radical rejection’ of his father’s love, and a rebellion which is repeated in each of our lives as we turn our back on God. The result is that we lose our identity as God’s beloved children, become deaf to his voice of love, and end up searching for love in all the wrong places. This accounts for so much of our ‘angst’ or inner pain, for when we do not know that we are loved unconditionally we become insecure and will try and earn acceptance by becoming successful, popular or powerful. Our search for love can become addictive since we cannot do without the things that give us temporary relief. Yet all the time the father waits for us to return home.

Rembrandt’s painting clearly portrays the tragedy of being lost – the son’s shaven head, tattered undergarment and broken sandals. When we turn our backs on God’s love we suffer from insecurity and rejection and inevitably find ourselves in a place of brokenness. But like the son we can come to our senses and return home to the father who always welcomes us. The way of repentance does not come easily, however. ‘Belief in total, absolute forgiveness does not come readily,’ writes Nouwen, and again ‘One of the greatest challenges to the spiritual life is to receive God’s forgiveness.’ When we do humble ourselves though we find the father’s blessing is freely restored - a new robe on our back, sandals for our feet, a ring on our finger, and a party to celebrate! We can take our place again as God’s beloved child if we choose to do so.

A friend pointed out to Nouwen that in his preoccupation with the younger son he may have overlooked the fact that he was in reality as much like the elder brother, who in the picture stands stony-faced to the right with his arms clasped in measured disdain. He represents the Pharisees and teachers of the law (Luke 15:1) who had great difficulty in accepting the mercy of God towards sinners that Jesus demonstrated. Nouwen himself recognised within himself the lostness of the elder brother, living a dutiful and obedient life, yet a prisoner to anger and resentment, bitterness and jealousy. If we are honest that same ‘serious, moralistic intensity’ can be in our hearts too. We can live by works rather than by grace; like a servant, not as a son. The question is, ‘Can the elder son in me come home? Am I willing to leave the darkness, step into the light and join the party?’

‘The hardest conversion to go through,’ says Nouwen, ‘is the conversion of the one who stayed at home.’ The father of course loves both sons equally with his non-comparing love. In order to step into the light and enter the house of joy I have to let go of all rivalry and competition and surrender to the Father’s love. How can we allow ourselves to be found? According to Nouwen, it will be through the daily disciplines of trust and gratitude. *Trust*, the deepening conviction that the father wants me home; *gratitude*, the recognition that all I am and have is a gift to me of love. Both require a step of faith. We are not told if the elder son responded well or not. It is left as an open question, and as Nouwen says, this is the inner drama of the soul.

This parable of Jesus on which the painting is based is in fact a story of the Father’s love, full of tenderness, mercy and forgiveness. In the painting he appears as a stooped, elderly figure who has suffered much, and who is now blind, yet who gently welcomes and restores his lost son but who loves both children equally. If we receive this truth of the non-comparing love of God many of our emotional problems can be healed for they are often caused by comparing ourselves to others, either favourably or not. ‘Here lies the core of my spiritual struggle,’ says Nouwen, ‘the struggle against self-rejection, self-contempt and self-loathing. . . Beneath much human assertiveness, competitiveness, and rivalry; beneath much self-confidence and even arrogance, there is often a very insecure heart; much less sure of itself than outward behaviour would lead one to believe.’ The invitation is to get to know our loving Father more deeply.

As returned children of God who have resumed their place in the house of joy, the challenge is to become like the father ourselves. Spiritual fatherhood has nothing to do with power or control, it is about compassion. The final stage of the spiritual life is to live out this compassion in our daily lives in a selfless, outgoing love. Can I give without wanting anything in return, and love without putting any conditions on that love? *Grief* is a way to compassion for it is formed through many tears. *Forgiveness* is a way to compassion for it is formed as we forgive ourselves and others. *Generosity* is a way to compassion, for it is formed by the giving of self and letting go of self-interest. To become the father is no easy calling, but it is the goal: ‘Can I let the younger and elder son in me grow to the maturity of the compassionate father?’

A book like ‘The return of the Prodigal son’ has to be read slowly and thoughtfully for it speaks to the heart and not just the mind. We have to reflect deeply on the issues being raised and consider our lives in the light of what we are reading. That is why it will repay careful study and reading again and again. You can do this either alone or with others. If you would like some help with this I have a FREE study guide which is available by sending me your email address. My prayer is that you too will discover your identity as God beloved child, on whom his favour rests.