

S1/S2

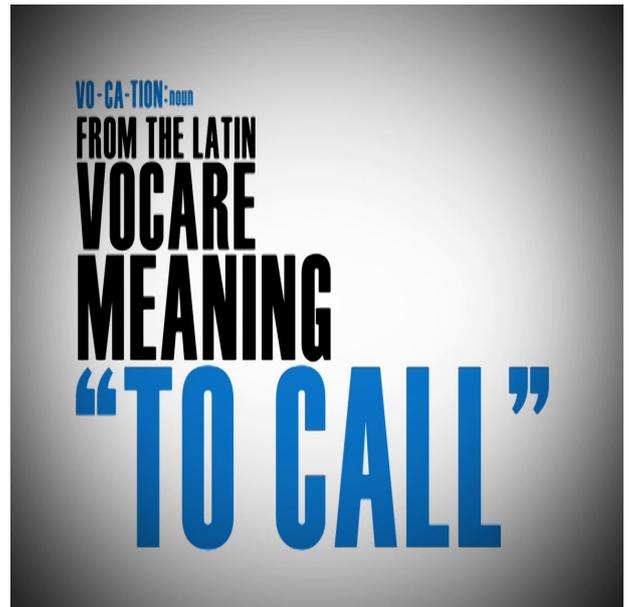
Return of the Prodigal Son



Introduction

This week the Catholic Church in Scotland celebrates Vocations Awareness Week – a week of prayer, reflection and celebration of the truth that God calls people to serve Him in the Priesthood.

For centuries, the Christian faith has provided inspiration for countless artists across the world. As we mark this week in our Catholic schools across Scotland we'll be thinking about how artists have portrayed the theme of 'Vocation' in their work! We'll be looking at some of the most famous works of art and seeing how they can speak to us in the here and now of our lives!



Starter activity

- (a) How many famous pictures/paintings can you name
- (b) What is going on in the picture / What story does it tell ?
- (c) Think of pictures/images you may have viewed in your local Church, what pictures are there
- (d) Why do we have lots of images in our Churches ?

The Return of the Prodigal Son

Rembrandt's painting The Return of the Prodigal Son is said by some to be the greatest ever painting! At the present time it is on display at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.

The painting depicts the closing scene of one of the most famous parables told by Jesus – the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32).

Luke 15:11-32

¹ Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’

²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. ²⁷ He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. ²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ ³¹ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

In the parable, a father has two sons. The younger son asks the father for his inheritance, and the father grants his son's request. However, the younger son is prodigal (i.e., wasteful and extravagant) and squanders his fortune, eventually becoming destitute. The younger son is forced to return home empty-handed and intends to beg his father to accept him back as a servant. To the son's surprise, he is not rejected by his father but is welcomed back with celebration and fanfare. Envious, the older son refuses to participate in the festivities. The father tells the older son "you are ever with me, and all that I have is yours, but thy younger brother was lost and now he is found".

Rembrandt found this story incredibly inspiring, so much so that he based four of his paintings on the parable! He felt the parable was, in many ways, the story of his life.



The painting was one of the last painted by Rembrandt and it was found in his studio after his death in 1669

The Painting Explained

The three main figures in the painting are the **Prodigal Son**, the **Elder Son** and the **Father**.

The Prodigal Son

The Prodigal Son is at the front of the picture kneeling. Since he has wasted all his inheritance, he can no longer afford any shoes! He has to use a piece of rope for his belt and his head is shaved (in the ancient world that was a sign of being poor!). He is also very thin and untidy! Some people say the fact he is kneeling indicates that he is ashamed and embarrassed.

The Elder Son

To the right of the Prodigal Son is his elder brother. Look at his arms! They are crossed – this indicates that he is not yet ready to forgive his brother and that he is still very angry with him!

The Father

The Father is embracing the Prodigal Son. Look at his hands! The Father's left hand is delicate whereas his right hand looks stronger! Some suggest that the left hand is like a woman's hand and the right is more like a man's – its as if the artist is saying that God's love is greater than a mother's and father's love combined!

Look too at the Father's eyes – they lack focus and direction. Could it be that the Father is actually blind – possibly blind to the faults of the Prodigal Son? Or possibly the Father may have been blinded by years of staring into the distance searching of any sign of his son coming home.

The Others

The two men who are watching the scene unfold are probably servants. The woman at the back of the painting (barely visible) is possibly the mother of two sons. The artist doesn't really give them much attention because he wants us to focus on the three figures at the front – the Prodigal Son, the Father and the Elder Son!

Leaving and Returning

The picture shows the Return of the Prodigal Son. In order to “return” you first have to leave! The Prodigal Son left his Father and went to a distant land where he spent all his inheritance.

Many people think that in the painting, the artist is trying to remind us that, at different times in our lives, we ‘leave’ God behind and become ‘lost’.

Some people get ‘lost’ in the busyness of their lives. Others might get ‘lost’ in social media or in a sport or in hobby. Sadly, some get ‘lost’ in a world of addiction.

Becoming ‘lost’, leaving ‘God’ – is something that many people do at some point in their lives.

Activities

For Reflection/Discussion:

Can you think of a time in your own life when you felt you were ‘leaving God behind’ and getting lost in the busy-ness of your life?

On your own:

In your own words, write a prayer. Tell God about the times in your life when you've forgotten Him or left Him behind. Thank Him for always being there for you, especially when things are difficult and challenging.

Being Grateful

In the Parable and in the painting, the Prodigal Son returns home after being 'lost'. He has been away in a distant land, far from his family, far from those who truly love him. He is, however, not the only person who is lost. We hear in the Gospel that when the Prodigal Son came home, his elder brother felt jealous, resentful and unappreciated. In a sense he is 'lost' in negative feelings and emotions. What can bring him 'home'? What can bring him back to his true-self? What can make him love his brother again?

The answer is 'gratitude'! Its only by being grateful for the return of his brother can let go of al the jealousy and resentment he feels.

Activities

For Reflection/Discussion:

What are things in your life that are you truly grateful for?

On your own:

Mind-Map the above! Start in the centre with the phrase 'what I'm grateful for' and draw a mind-map of your ten things/people/talents you're grateful to have in your life!

Image of God

In the painting, Rembrandt shows us how he imagines God. For him, God ids a Father who always forgives and whose love for us is greater than anything we can imagine.

Sadly, people often have images of God that are not quite as positive as Rembrandt's! . Perhaps they imagine a god as a judge who's quick to condemn them or maybe they see God as a distant relative to whom we speak to once a year and only see at family occasions. Or possibly they might imagine Him as sitting on a cloud all day and not really bothered about what happens to us down below.

Jesus came to tell us the truth about God - that He does care, that He loves us and that He is always there for us!

Activities

For Reflection/Discussion

How do you imagine God? When you hear the word 'God' what comes into your mind?

Extension Activity

Working in a group make a poster of how you imagine God. Be prepared to present it to the rest of your class!



#chaplainchat

Invite your school chaplain or a local priest into your class to speak about his vocation. Using some of the themes we touched on previously, you may ask Him to reflect on the following:

Leaving and Returning

How does the Chaplain reach out those in the community who are, in any sense, 'lost' and feel far from God? How does help them 'return' to God?

Gratitude

What parts of his life is the Chaplain grateful for? What makes him happy? What inspires him?

Image of God

How does the chaplain imagine God? What does he think God is like?