



## **Parish of the Nativity of the Lord**

Book+Circle – April 2024

### **The Return of the Prodigal Son” by Henri Nouwen**

#### **About the Book**

*A chance encounter with a reproduction of Rembrandt's The Return of the Prodigal Son catapulted Henri Nouwen on a long spiritual adventure. Here he shares the deeply personal and resonant meditation that led him to discover the place within which God has chosen to dwell. He probes the several movements of the parable: the younger son's return, the father's restoration of sonship, the elder son's vengefulness, and the father's compassion.*

#### **How did the book make us feel?**

This was a book that we all enjoyed and was described as inspiring, impressive, coherent, well written and brave – Nouwen was very honest about his life and feelings.

The author captures so much detail in the Rembrandt painting of the Prodigal Son and was written in a way that was easy to follow and to appreciate. There was so much ‘food for thought’ in the descriptions. The book helps illustrate and shows the depth behind the parable. Despite knowing this parable well, we hadn’t thought about all the characters involved and what role they/we play - where we fit as the prodigal son, the older son, the father, the seated observer etc

We all felt the author, in describing his own personal reaction to the painting, showed true humility.

It was fascinating to learn about Rembrandt and how his own life changed over the years and whilst it was sad to see him hit rock bottom to an extent we agree that this probably helped give such meaning and detail to his paintings.

#### **What did we think were the book’s main strengths?**

The book was well structured and logical making it an easy read. Henri Nouwen helps us think about our own lives by using Art. As he talks about the painting, the characters in the painting and his own life, they become intertwined, and the reader also becomes part of the story too. The details are amazing, as an example the description of the ‘father’s hands’.

The discussion around the various elements of the picture also reflect the infinite depth of the Bible.

We were all surprised that the author could share so much about his own personal worries and concerns, not looking for sympathy, but in a way to help the reader think about the way their own lives have gone.

Each character in the painting is considered in such depth by the author that we all felt quite different towards the parable of the prodigal son having read this book. We liked the approach towards the older son. It helped one reader reflect on even if at times you could relate more easily to the older 'grumpy' son, the author points out that God says 'you are with me always and all I have is yours' - we are all very blessed.

One of the strengths of this book was that the author had spent a long time studying Rembrandt's painting and in describing what he saw, the reader was left with no doubt as to the genius of Rembrandt and the beauty to be found in Sacred Art.

**What did we think were the book's main weaknesses?**

This book had very few weaknesses. One reader hoped to have read towards the end that the author forgave himself for his concerns earlier in life but he didn't go that far. However, we did feel that after describing quite challenging mental health issues earlier in life that towards the end of the book he was more open to trusting his life to God.

We couldn't see all the characters in the painting on the cover of this book referred to by Nouwen eg a 4<sup>th</sup> woman

**Would we read other books by this author and would we recommend this book to others?**

Yes we thought we would read books by this author. We were interested that the author lived in the 'L'Arche' community.

A good read for anyone who has a belief in God. We wondered if people who enjoy Art but have no faith, would be interested in how this author has described this famous painting. And we thought that people who have left the Church might be interested.

**Next Book** – Friday 24 May 10.30am after morning mass at St Joseph's.

- **The Road to Emmaus and beyond" (new revised edition) by Fr Denis McBride**