

Jesus College

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There are many striking representations of the story of the Prodigal Son in art, for example, the painter and illustrator Jean-Louis Forain – a friend of Rimbaud, and colleague of Manet – produced memorable etchings of the Parable. In one, he showed the wretched and bedraggled son kneeling at the feet of his father, and the father gently holding his son's head against his own chest. It is a simple and beautiful drawing. But the most famous depiction of this emotional scene is surely the great painting by Rembrandt, one of his late works, which hangs in the Hermitage Gallery in St Petersburg. The detail in the painting is remarkable – the father's hands on his son's shoulders, the slightly balding, dishevelled head of the son, the sense of comradeship among the father's friends and retainers who frame the central act of reconciliation. It is above all the look on the father's face – in the words of the musical, a look of 'Sweet Charity' – which makes this painting such a magnificent depiction of what is one of the central messages of Christianity, that balancing of justice and love which brings in its train forgiveness and reconciliation.

'Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven'. Blessed also, is he who forgives.

This is not a virtue which is only shown in explicitly Christian art. My favourite painting is 'The Surrender at Breda' by Velazquez, in which the Italian mercenary general, Spinola, commanding a Spanish army accepts the keys of the Dutch city of Breda in 1625 from its commandant after a long siege. The Dutch general attempts to kneel before his conqueror, but Spinola puts his arm around him and treats him like a brave colleague not an enemy. It is a scene which exemplifies magnanimity, that 'great souled' quality identified by Aristotle as the attribute of a gentleman.

This 'great souled' virtue, magnanimous reconciliation, has not always been prominent in the history of the Christian churches. Christians have persecuted those of other faiths. We launched pogroms against Jews and until quite recently in the Catholic church identified them in our liturgy as the perpetrators of deicide. We have launched crusades against Muslims just as they have sometimes persecuted Christians, and still do today, for instance in northern Nigeria. We held a cross over the heads of the indigenous people of South and Central America as they were slaughtered. Even today, a huge cross – the Christian symbol of sacrifice and resurrection – looms in somewhat baleful triumphalism over the Moslem quarter of Mostar, flattened by Catholic Croats in the Bosnian civil war of the 1990s.

Christians have been notoriously cruel and violent to one another. This city of Oxford has been the scene of some of the most famous examples of this scandal-giving wickedness. There is a plaque in the University Church which commemorates the martyrdom of both Anglicans and Catholics. The church itself, a few hundred yards from here, was the place of trial for Latimer, Ridley and Cranmer before they were burned a hundred yards to the left of the college lodge in the Broad before the gates of Balliol. A cross marks the place where this martyrdom took place.

During a remarkable address at an Interfaith gathering during the Papal Visit, the Chief Rabbi, Dr Sacks, pointed out that what led to secularisation after the Enlightenment was that ‘people lost faith in the ability of people of faith, to live peacefully together... We must never go down that road again’, he concluded. And he quoted Cardinal Newman’s words ‘We should ever conduct ourselves towards our enemy as if he were one day to be our friend.’

We do not, of course, burn or gas one another today. But until recently our efforts to share this archipelago off the European mainland in peace was disfigured by what purported to be a conflict between Protestants and Catholics. In truth, it had less to do with belief in transubstantiation or rejection of Papal authority than with land, tribal identity and the symbols and manifestations of sovereign authority. But I often wondered during the years I spent in Northern Ireland whether the principal Christian denominations, despite the brave work and commitment of many dedicated individuals, were doing as much as the Christian message should have demanded of them to build bridges between communities and replace bigotry and violence with reconciliation.

The Northern Ireland conflict would never have been resolved had there not been several acts of magnanimity by the main actors – Mr Blair, Mr Aherne and Mo Mowlem, a remarkable woman whose strong and charitable character led her to take the sort of risks which would have made others nervous. The risks she ran paved the path to peace.

We are still plagued by the identity politics which lay at the root of Northern Ireland’s years of community suffering, not least in Western Europe. And I fear that some of their malign consequences are likely to be one of the consequences of years of economic disappointment in Europe; the sort of disappointment that leads to political and cultural alienation. Identity politics have always brought division and violence of language and conduct. Extremes of tribal populism identify ‘the other’ as the cause of our own tribe’s problems. Sometimes our grievances against ‘the other’ are rooted in fantasy as well as fear; sometimes they have at least a colourable justification in fact. But they never recognise the complexity of identity, and rarely offer generosity and understanding rather than suspicion and hostility.

When the supposed differences of identity are religious, I think that it is a mistake to consider them simply on their own terms, arguing that the distinctions between religious categories can be obliterated by appealing to a nobler vision of the religious beliefs in debate. We often do this, as Amartya Sen has argued, when we are appealing to Islamic terrorists or their apologists and supporters to turn away from violence in the name of what we claim is our own real version of Islam as a religion of peace. Rejecting a confrontational view of Islam is certainly appropriate, but why don't we go beyond religion and argue for a recognition of that humanism which should be the foundation of any global civil society. Extremists try to force us to give up our civil liberties and lose our civic ideals, which reinforce 'great souled' reconciliation. In open, liberal and tolerant societies, we need to beware binding the identity of an individual to the expression of a single given community, even a religious one. Our proper desire to recognise and respect the identity which people choose may easily become the very means by which we deprive individuals of rights in favour of artificial collectives, in which self-appointed leaders to whom an act of forgiveness would usually be regarded as an alien act are deemed to speak for their communities.

So the generosity of spirit which should be practised by faith groups is buttressed by the assertion of civil idealism and civic responsibility. Reconciliation is the political act of a citizen and not simply a religious responsibility. And however hard it may prove to be, magnanimity is always preferable to remembering wrongs and harbouring grievances. For all of us, there should be an echo of understanding for the words of the father of the Prodigal Son, when we bury our resentment at the wrongs that may have been done to us. 'For this thy brother was dead, and is alive again, and was lost and is found.'