

## Homily

**Evensong 13 November 2022**

**St James' Church, Lower Hutt**

**Readings:** Genesis 1:26-27, Luke 10:25-37

**Rev'd Murray Wills**

May the words on my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you God our rock and redeemer. Amen

As you know we are doing a series on Art and Artists, that speak to us.

A couple of weeks ago I was on retreat at an Abbey in the Hawkes Bay and I set about reflection on the theme of this Evensong.

As part of the research for this I did a search for "Artists and Christian", and then "Artists and Christian and disability" as I was keen to incorporate disability theology into the discussion if I could.

I came up with a number of artists with disabilities and artists who were both Christian and disabled, and then I came up with potential composers for Jonathan as a starting point for the music side of things.

On the music side that included Bach (blind after surgery), Beethoven (deafness and mental illness), Stanley (blindness), Handel (blindness), Samuel Wesley (mental health issues as the result of an accident)

We have music by Beethoven and Wesley today.

On the artist side of things, the list included:

- Michelangelo – gout or Osteoarthritis (experts disagree) – Severe problems with hands and feet
- Francisco Goya – neurological problems from syphilis
- Paul Klee – skin problems and internal organ issues
- Henri Matisse – a wheel chair user after surgery for cancer
- Van Gogh - temporal lobe epilepsy as well as bipolar disorder

One of the artists that was all three; a Christian, an artist, and disabled was Vincent van Gogh. I had seen his painting *Starry Night* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and I was aware that he had also painted a picture of the Good Samaritan, that was less well known.

While on retreat a couple of weeks ago I took a trip to Pleroma Christian bookshop in Otane – north of Waipukurau, to see what they had on offer and also to see a friend of my son who works there.

There, staring me in the face on the first display of new books was this book with the bright yellow cover “Vincent van Gogh and the Good Samaritan” by Henry Martin.

This was clearly a “God Moment”, had put me in this place at this time, and presented to me this book, and my decision had been made!

So, to our Artist and Art:

When I started – I knew very little about van Gogh’s life. I now know a great deal, particularly about some of the contentious parts, like the circumstances of his death (I’ll come to this later).

We know a lot because van Gogh was a prolific letter writer, particularly to his younger brother Theo who was his main benefactor. He wrote something like 800 letters, which were kept. He painted around 900 paintings.

So first his Christian beginnings. Van Gogh was born in 1853 in the Netherlands. His father was a minister and as eldest son he was expected to follow in his father’s footsteps. Vincent will have been very familiar with the story of the good Samaritan, and the influence of it can be seen on his life.

Vincent worked for an art dealer in The Hague, London, and Paris, and he later worked in England at a boarding school before working as a Methodist minister’s assistant. He failed the entrance exams to the School of Theology in Amsterdam so he took a three-month course at a protestant missionary school in Laken, and then in 1879 he began working as an evangelist and preacher on a six-month trial in the coal mining area in southern Belgium. After six months his contract was not renewed. Why – well apparently, “local legend remembers him as a saint, even an angel: giving his money and clothes away, sleeping on the floor of a hut, carrying coal for pregnant women and caring for

the sick”<sup>1</sup>. He apparently neglected his basic human needs, did not eat properly, worked relentlessly, and his physical and mental health suffered.

The Church committee took a dim view of this and how Vincent was caring for himself, and the extremes he was willing to go to in ministry and they did not renew his contract.

Vincent understood the unconditional love of God extended to unconditional love for others<sup>2</sup>.

In Vincent’s mind he would have been no doubt acting out the love of Jesus expressed in the parable of the good Samaritan, and he grew disillusioned with religious institutions and saw them as lacking in love and not effectively and practically practicing what they preach.

He rejected formal Christianity and turned to art, but his life is smattered with examples of taking people in, helping them out, and acting as the good Samaritan.

He developed his own spirituality based on respect for love, art, truth, and his overwhelming appreciation of nature. He never abandoned the notion of God, and he remained fascinated by Christ’s humanity<sup>3</sup>.

### **Van Gogh’s Painting**

Theo, Vincent’s brother and benefactor would send Vincent prints, wood cuts and lithographs of other artist’s work and Vincent would copy them. We know he had a copy of a lithograph of Delacroix’s ‘The Good Samaritan’ in his room in Arles in early 1889 and we know that he had finished his copy in 1890, because he wrote to his brother Theo from the asylum at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence where he had checked himself in, to tell him so.

We don’t know whether he ever saw the coloured version of Delacroix’s work, and it is most probable that he didn’t, he just saw the black and white lithograph.

You will note that Vincent’s version is on the left and Delacroix’s is on the right. I know which one I prefer. Note the Priest off in the distance and the Levite, who didn’t help the person who had been robbed and beaten. I’m sure this

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<sup>1</sup> Martin, Henry. (2021). Vincent van Gogh and the Good Samaritan. London: Darton, Longman and Todd. p22.

<sup>2</sup> P, Janelle. (2015, Feb 5) Vincent van Gogh’s Unappreciated Journey with Christ. Vincent van Gogh’s Unappreciated Journey with Christ - Open Doors USA. Accessed 12 November 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Martin, Henry. (2021). Vincent van Gogh and the Good Samaritan. London: Darton, Longman and Todd. p23.

would have brought back memories for Vincent of the experience he had in ministry in Belgium.

### **Van Gogh's Mental Health**

Vincent suffered from attacks where he became confused and lost his grip on reality. It was during one of these attacks that he cut off his own ear. He was convinced that more attacks would happen and they would rob him ultimately of the ability to paint at all and that was what led him to paint so prolifically, at one point producing a painting a day. His manic behaviour in painting so prolifically may have also been a result of his bipolar disorder or manic depression. At Saint-Rémy-de-Provence alone he painted 300 paintings.

Some scholars believe that Vincent may have seen himself as the wounded man. The bandage around the head of the man in the painting is not dissimilar to the bandage that Vincent wore after mutilating his ear. There are many other wounded people that Vincent may have thought about also that he had exposure to in his life, including coal miners and others at the asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence.

### **His Use of Yellow**

You will notice a lot of yellow in the painting and in many of Vincent's paintings, and Vincent dressed the Samaritan predominantly in yellow, the colour of the wheat fields, sunflowers, and his sunrises in Arles in the south of France.

He believed that artists should depict a character's holiness "not with a halo, but rather with radiant, vibrant colours"<sup>4</sup> Vincent thought of yellows and golds as depicting life, and as a means to take away sadness and death<sup>5</sup>.

He lived also in a yellow house and he named a time of great productivity "the yellow high note" of his career.

Vincent had temporal lobe epilepsy as well as bipolar disorder. He was born with a brain lesion which may have been aggravated by his use of absinthe. It is believed that his physician, Dr. Gachet prescribed digitalis to treat his seizures. One common side effect from this medicine is seeing yellow spots and some

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.114.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.114.

historians wonder if this is why Van Gogh seemed to love to use the colour yellow in his art.

There is a myth that Vincent never sold anything in his lifetime. The truth is that he sold several drawings and one canvas<sup>6</sup>, nowhere near enough for him to cover costs. His brother Theo provided his income and materials.

In his remaining eleven months he produced over one hundred and seventy canvases including the Good Samaritan.

We have his brother Theo to thank for enabling Vincent's painting and his sister-in-law Johanna to thank for ensuring his paintings were exhibited after his death.

Our first reading today from Genesis 1 states "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Imago Deo (in Gods image).

I want to emphasize that even though van Gogh had issues, almost all of us do, or will do, from a disability perspective. In fact, 23%<sup>7</sup> of us identify as disabled, and if we live long enough all of us will be disabled. I want to celebrate the fact that God gives us all gifts and we have the ability to use them in beautiful ways. For van Gogh, that was in his service as a minister, in the way he lived his life, in the many times he acted sacrificially, and in his art and letters.

Perhaps we should think of ourselves therefore as temporally abled.

If we are to "love our neighbour as ourselves", then that immediately leads to discussion and action on inclusion, relationship, access, love, equality and others that you may be able to think of.

God has often chosen disabled bodies to carry out key tasks in the kingdom. Moses was chosen by God as a leader, even though he stuttered (Exod 4:10-17), and God indicates that it was God that brought his stutter upon him (Exod 4:11). In 2 Cor 12:7-10 Paul prays three times for a thorn in his flesh to be removed and God does not heal him. God says instead "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness". In Paul's weakness he finds strength<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.38.

<sup>7</sup> NZ Census

<sup>8</sup> "Who Is the God We Worship?: Theologies of Disability: Challenges and New Possibilities." *International Journal of Practical Theology* 14, no. 2 (2010 2010): 273-307.

## Vincent's Final Act as a Samaritan

Most historical sources refer to Vincent having committed suicide by shooting himself in the chest. However, there is more and more evidence that in fact he was accidentally shot by two boys playing with a gun.

No gun was found, and there were no powder burns near the wound. Two boys admitted that they were shooting near Vincent, and although they didn't admit to shooting him, one did write a confession years later saying they were harassing him and that "there were things that he did to him he wish he'd never done<sup>9</sup>". Vincent took two days to die, and when interviewed by police said "I'm hurt but don't blame anybody else". It was typical for Vincent to take the blame for others.

I believe after reading the accounts and knowing he was dying that he committed this last act of love by forgiving the boys as Jesus would have. Vincent van Gogh died at the age of 37.

"Despite personal suffering and an acute awareness of the suffering of others, Vincent was very attuned to the beauty of this world and lived a life of wide embrace. He saw the image of God in people and in nature and honoured that image through his paintings, of sunflowers, cypresses, olive groves, wheat fields, farmers and mothers and postmen, soldiers, doctors, café owners, and his own self."<sup>10</sup> Vincent was able to reveal in his art a God, so intensely compassionate and radically loving. A God we want to come close to<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> P, Janelle. (2015, Feb 5) Vincent van Gogh's Unappreciated Journey with Christ. Vincent van Gogh's Unappreciated Journey with Christ - Open Doors USA. Accessed 12 November 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, Victoria., Emily. (2020, June 23). Three poems about Vincent van Gogh. <https://artandtheology.org/2020/06/23/three-poems-about-vincent-van-gogh/>. Accessed 12 November 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Cliff Edwards, *Van Gogh and God: A Creative Spiritual Quest* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1989), x. Another helpful source on van Gogh is Robert Rosenblum, "Van Gogh," chap. in *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 65-100.

