
GANZ – FOURTH MEDITATION FOR LENT 2025



Rembrandt (1606-1669)¹, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1642) in the Teylers Museum,
Haarlem, North Holland, The Netherlands

¹ Grove Art at “**Rembrandt (Harmensz.) van Rijn**” by B.P.J. Broos et al. - Dutch painter, draughtsman and etcher. From 1632 onwards he signed his works with only the forename *Rembrandt*; in documents, however, he continued to sign *Rembrandt van Rijn* (occasionally *van Rhyn*), initially with the addition of the patronymic ‘Harmensz.’. This was no doubt in imitation of the great Italians such as Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael and Titian, on whom he modelled himself,

Pope Francis, 1 February 2025 – And for us too, the experience of faith has been stimulated by encounters with *people who have been able to change in life* and have, so to speak, entered into God's dreams. For even though there is much evil in the world, we can distinguish who is different: *their greatness, which often coincides with littleness, wins us over*. ... Dear brothers and sisters, from Mary Magdalene, whom tradition calls “the apostle of the apostles”, we learn hope. *One enters the new world by converting more than once. Our journey is a constant invitation to change perspective*. ... Instead of looking into the darkness of the past, into the emptiness of a tomb, from Mary Magdalene *we learn to turn towards life. There our Master awaits us. There our name is spoken. For in real life there is a place for us, always and everywhere*.

In Contact (the movie, 1997) based on the novel (1985) by Carl Sagan – “You're an interesting species. An interesting mix. You're capable of such beautiful dreams, and such horrible nightmares. You feel so lost, so cut off, so alone, only you're not. See, in all our searching, the only thing we've found that makes the emptiness bearable, is each other.”

Scripture² – Luke 15: –

³¹ ‘The father said, “My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours. ³² But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.” ‘³

This parable, considered one of the great literary works of the world, is the last of a trinity of famous parables in Luke 15.⁴

But notice how the chapter begins:

By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. **They growled**, “He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.” **Their grumbling triggered this story.**

sometimes literally. He certainly equaled them in fame, and not only in his own country. His name still symbolizes a whole period of art history rightfully known as ‘Holland’s Golden Age’.

² This is the Gospel read today on the 4th Sunday of Lent.

³ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Lk 15:31–32.

⁴ I believe that it is included in the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*; that is, it made the cut; judged significant enough to the whole world, religious or not, to be included in the “canon” – a definitive collection of the greatest treasures of literature.

[Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), Lk 15:1-3.]

Curiously this chapter begins in such an unpromising way, with an ugly sound. Did you hear those sounds of men *grumbling* (*murmuring*)⁵ discontentedly, even angrily? The Latin (Vulgate) translation of **grumbling** is: ² Et *murmurabant*⁶ - and thus "to murmur." There are two things that are helpful to notice.

First, the Latin verb is rendered in the Imperfect Tense, which describes actions that were ongoing, habitual, or incomplete in the past. This means not only that these men grumbled, but that *it had become a habit* with them - "they kept on/would not stop grumbling". C.S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce* has a passage where the traveler/narrator meets a wise man, George Macdonald (1824-1905). They observe a waspish⁷ woman who is making a noisy complaint to an Angel! Macdonald explains that if it is *she* who is grumbling, then there is hope, because there still exists enough of her to choose *not* to grumble. But if her grumbling has become a *habit* (i.e., it has become "second nature" - thus "waspish"), then she has ceased to be a person free enough *not* to grumble. She is no longer *a person who grumbles* but a *Grumble*. Macdonald continues:

The whole difficulty of understanding Hell is that the thing to be understood is so nearly Nothing. But ye'll have had experiences ... *it begins with a grumbling mood*, and yourself still distinct from it: perhaps criticizing it. And yourself, in a dark hour, may will that mood, embrace it. Ye can repent and come out of it again. *But there may come a day when you can do that no longer*. Then there will be no *you* left to criticize the mood, nor even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself going on forever like a machine. (*The Great Divorce*, Chapter 9)

Second, in the Old Testament, grumbling is a hateful habit of the people of God. Grumbling or murmuring against God and Moses was characteristic of them during the years that they wandered in the Wilderness. They who for generations had been enslaved in Egypt found freedom deeply unsettling and bridled at the demands it made on them. *Easier to grumble than to grow up*. As parents react badly to the rolling eyes of

⁵ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the noun "**grumble**" - **1. - 1623** - An act of grumbling; a murmur, of discontent or dissatisfaction; a subdued utterance of complaint. And then the verb "to grumble" - **1.a. - 1608** - Of persons and animals: To utter dull inarticulate sounds; to mutter, mumble, murmur; to growl faintly.

⁶ The Greek of this verb "**to murmur**" - **33.383 διαγογγύζω**: to express discontent in an emphatic way - 'to complain, to grumble.' ἰδόντες πάντες διεγόγγυζον 'all the people who saw it started grumbling' Lk 19:7. [Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, in *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996) 432.]

⁷ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**waspish**" - **2.a. - 1566** - *esp.* Quick to resent any trifling injury or affront; irascible, petulantly spiteful.

discontent in the face of teenagers, so God had a particular distaste for the incessant grumbling in the mouths of His people – God “loathed”⁸ it (Psalm 95:10).

Exodus 15: ²⁴ *Et murmuravit populus contra Moysen*⁹ - “and they grumbled against Moses” (because they had to be habitually thirsty).

Exodus 16: ² *Et murmuravit omnis congregatio filiorum Israel contra Moysen et Aaron in solitudine*¹⁰ - “and the whole people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the Wilderness”.

Psalm 95 (NAB):

⁸ Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah,
as on the day of Massah¹¹ in the desert.

⁹ There your ancestors tested me;
they tried me though they had seen my works.

¹⁰ Forty years **I loathed that generation;**
I said: “This people’s heart goes astray;
they do not know my ways.”¹²

Have you noticed how we Americans need to pay closer attention to our grumbling? Is not grumbling one of the proofs that we have indulged a *lethal habit of becoming victims of our reality* rather than free participants in it, who work the problem, seeking counsel

⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “to loathe” – **4.a. - a1200** – To feel aversion or dislike for; to be reluctant or unwilling to (do something). Now only with stronger sense: To have an intense aversion for; to regard with utter abhorrence and disgust.

⁹ [*Nova Vulgata Bibliorum Sacrorum Editio*](#), Editio Typica Altera. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1986), Ex 15:24.

¹⁰ [*Nova Vulgata Bibliorum Sacrorum Editio*](#), Editio Typica Altera. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1986), Ex 16:2.

¹¹ One of the names given to REPHIDIM after the Israelites stayed there during their exodus from Egypt (Exod 17:1–7). **The people complain to Moses because they find no water to drink.** Moses presents their claim to God, who commands Moses to strike the rock at Horeb (an odd reference, since they have not yet arrived at Sinai). Moses does so, and the rock produces water to drink. Although the story does not present God as being angry at the people’s demand, **the name of Rephidim is changed to Massah, meaning “testing,” and MERIBAH, meaning “quarreling.” Massah then becomes the paradigmatic instance of the people testing God (Deut 6:16; 9:22).** [Kevin A. Wilson, “Massah,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006–2009) 834.]

¹² [*New American Bible*](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ps 95:8–10.

from the wise, showing courage, and sustaining a highly developed capacity for adventure? When has our habit of *blaming* (its opposite is *praising*) ever served us well?

Yet, this most beautiful parable in Luke 15 not only begins with grumbling but it nearly ends with grumbling – the grumbling of the elder son.

Luke 15 (NJB): ²⁸ He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out and began to urge him to come in; ²⁹ but he retorted to his father, “All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property – he and his loose women – you kill the calf we had been fattening.” ¹³

It is striking to me that one of the greatest parables was composed in relation to one of the most ignoble, immature, and irritating habits of human beings, who believe that God owes them clarity, overlooking that what we owe God is our trust. *The parable sits inside the sound of grumbling*, both before it – that of the Pharisees and Scribes (v2) and after it – that of the elder son’s complaint (vv28-30). Eugene Peterson puts it: “Their grumbling triggered this story.”

For heaven’s sake, if any person in the parable had a right to grumble, to feel exasperated and dishonored, it was the father. But he does *not* grumble or blame. The key is for us to ask ourselves: What does he do instead?

A Poem – G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936), “O God of Earth and Altar” (1905)

J.R. Watson, editor and commentator, *An Annotated Anthology of Hymns* (Oxford University Press, 2002) writes: “Like Henry Scott Holland, Chesterton was concerned at the state of the country [Britain] at the beginning of the last century [i.e., of the twentieth century]. His hymn used emblems of corruption to suggest the ills of society: a people who were drifting and dying spiritually; a nation consumed by greed and pride; and, in verse 3, a world in which lies were found in the press and in speeches, cruelty and terror abounded, and honor had been profaned.”

O God of earth and altar,
Bow down and hear our cry,
Our earthly rulers falter,
Our people drift and die;

The walls of gold entomb us,
The swords of scorn divide,

¹³ [*The New Jerusalem Bible*](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Lk 15:28–30.

Take not thy thunder from us,
But take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches,
From lies of tongue and pen,
From all the easy speeches
That comfort cruel men,

From sale and profanation
Of honour and the sword,
From sleep and from damnation,
Deliver us, good Lord.

Tie in a living tether
The prince and priest and thrall,
Bind all our lives together,
Smite us and save us all;

In ire and exultation
Aflame with faith, and free,
Lift up a living nation,
A single sword to thee.

The Poem - Observations and Insights -

O God of earth and altar, / Bow down and hear our cry, / Our earthly rulers falter, / Our people drift and die; - The fact that his nation is falling apart is described by Chesterton with a *poem*. We notice the rhyming in the four-line stanzas of the last word in the first and third lines, and of the last word in the second and fourth lines.

This effort to rhyme words that describe disordered things is an act of beauty - the loveliness of the sound of rhymes - but also of insight. *The poet relates things that would not occur to us to coordinate, which is what opens to us insight.*

Consider the intriguing insight given us in the rhyme “altar” and “falter” in the first stanza, suggesting that we falter when we have lost contact with our religious practice and with a religious teaching sufficient to our depth and experience.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* “**to falter**” - **3.a. - 1521** - To waver, lose steadfastness; to flinch, hesitate in action from lack of courage or resolution. Also of courage, hopes, resolve: To give way, flag.

Consider what we learn in the rhyme “profanation” with “damnation”, where the first word means: “To treat (something sacred) with irreverence, disrespect, or contempt; to desecrate.”

Consider the insight in “divide” and “pride”, where the second word means: “A high, esp. an excessively high, opinion of one's own worth or importance which gives rise to a feeling or attitude of superiority over others; inordinate self-esteem.”

Consider the rhyme “free” and “thee” (i.e. “God”), which compels us to ask in what way is God free – like “the land of the *free* and the home of the brave”, or a meaning of “free” quite different from that?

Do you see how this works?

Chesterton could have grumbled better than I can and do it far more elegantly. He was a man far greater than I. But he did *not* grumble. (And neither, not once, did the father in the parable.) Instead, he chose an ordering literary form – a poem – *to describe* to God what he understood about the increasing disorder within the social order and *to pray* for his country.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**hymn**” – **1. - Old English** – A song of praise to God; any composition in praise of God which is adapted to be chanted or sung; spec. a metrical composition adapted to be sung in a religious service; sometimes distinguished from *psalm* or *anthem*, as not being part of the text of the Bible.

His poem, which the churches of Britian, and with the help of the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams, consider a hymn,¹⁴ is itself, by its very composition as word and music and able to be sung by the whole congregation, a deed of hope, a victory of order in a disordered time, a prayer both humble and insightful sent *by all of us singing it* into the attentive ears of the Almighty.

Prayer: “O God, who through your Word reconcile the human race to Yourself in a wonderful way, grant, we pray, that with prompt devotion and eager faith the Christian people may hasten toward the solemn celebrations to come.”

¹⁴ “O God of Earth and Altar” – King’s Lynn in the album *A Vaughan Williams Hymnal: The Choir of Trinity College Cambridge* (1995).