



CATHERINE POWER, SPECIAL TO THE SPECTATOR

The worn feet of a Yemeni man in the historic quarter of Sana'a, Yemen. Columnist Thomas Froese finds, at Easter, the biblical imagery to be striking, especially since there is not one Christian church for 20 million Yemenis.

Biblical images on Sana'a's streets



THOMAS FROESE

The feet of 'ragged men',
Vincent Van Gogh and the
story of the prodigal son
all come to mind as
Easter dawns in Yemen

SANAA, YEMEN

I wonder if the prodigal son had blistered feet. And I wonder if Vincent Van Gogh, if he were alive, would come to Yemen to paint them.

You likely know Christ's parable of the prodigal. A young man abandons home, taking his inheritance early. He lives wildly, then winds up alone and broke and eating in the company of pigs. When he finally returns home, hoping to be just a hired hand, his lovesick father runs, ridiculously, likely almost tripping on his robe, to meet him in the distance. He throws his arms around his son. And he throws a party.

It's a universal story. Ernest Hemingway tells it well in *The Capitol of the World* while writing about a runaway teenage son. After a lengthy search, the longing father takes out a Madrid newspaper ad. "Dear Paco, Meet me in front of the newspaper office tomorrow at noon. All is forgiven. I love you." The next day 800 men named Paco are at the office wanting to restore a broken relationship.

It's Rembrandt who painted a scene of the prodigal being held in his father's arms. The painting has such impact, Catholic priest and scholar Henri Nouwen once travelled to Russia just to see the original. He stood in front of it for four hours, then noted it shows humanity's

"yearning for a lasting home."

Van Gogh painted similar themes. And I'm reminded of this whenever I drive the dusty and busy streets of Yemen and slip Don McLean's song "Vincent" into my tape-deck. The lyrics explain how Vincent painted "weathered faces lined in pain." He put "frames around ragged men in ragged clothes." He "tried to set them free."

You have to be here to appreciate the imagery. You have to see Yemeni feet. They are not Paris feet. Or London or New York feet. Yemeni feet are not Toronto feet. They are not even Hamilton feet. For one, they're all in sandals. Riding a motorcycle? Working in construction? Going to the mosque? Sandals. And not surprisingly, like poorer feet of the ancient world, Yemeni feet walk, long distances sometimes, in sandals that are battered and torn. Yemeni feet are scarred. They're bruised. And dirty.

So, in Yemen, Van Gogh could find inspiration to paint the prodigal son's feet. And there's something very Easterish about this. Because after Jesus finished eating and laughing with his friends, after he hung out with the hookers, and tax collectors and other prodigals of his time, to make his lasting point unmistakably clear, Jesus washed their filthy feet and went off to die for them.

How interesting, then, in this Muslim country where there is not one Christian church for 20 million Yemenis, there are everyday pictures that are so biblical, and so much more vibrant than in the planet's more sophisticated places. It's something I'll keep in mind tomorrow morning when my family joins a couple of hundred other expatriates in an Easter service on a nearby, rocky plateau, as the sun rises.

The other thing one can't help but ponder is Van Gogh's disillusionment. As a young man, before becoming a painter, he wanted to, in his words, "sow the words of the Bible" to the poor in London's slums, in the grimy coal mines, in nearby farm fields. Later, painting the realness of such men and women, he said, "Christ is more of an artist than the artists; he works in the living spirit and the living flesh; he makes men instead of statues."

Yet this gifted and spiritually rich man, who was born this week in 1853, died young and hopeless by committing suicide. Why?

Putting aside the 19th century's lack of treatment for mental illness, one can't help but conclude that the deeply depressed Van Gogh couldn't absorb the rejection of having his work (worth a fortune today) go unrecognized. Apparently nobody understood, or could be bothered to understand, the different language of his colours, the strange composition of his brushstrokes, no matter how true and loving they were.

Rather than stopping, even briefly, to look at what was a unique window into eternity, people simply walked by. Blindly. Like some do with Christ. It's something to think about. Tomorrow. Or any day.

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