

## Henry Nouwen - Lyfe Story

Born: January 24 1932 in Nijkerk, Holland

Died: September 21 1996 in Hiversum

**Any list of influential writers on spirituality in the 20th century must include the Catholic priest Henri Nouwen. He wrote over 40 books on the spiritual life including *In the Name of Jesus* and *The Way of the Heart*. His influence has extended to many in both Protestant and Catholic circles. His story is one of unexpected twists and turns that clearly portrays the joys and struggles of the kind of spiritual life that Nouwen wrote so eloquently about.**

Nouwen was born and raised in Holland but spent most of his adult life in North America. During his time in seminary, he discovered an aptitude for psychology, and he went on to teach at some of the most prestigious universities, such as Yale and Notre Dame. This career path greatly pleased his family, but he began to wonder if he had lost sight of his vocation. He spoke honestly about how he would come home after lecturing and feel lonely and ill at ease. He commented, 'I was pretty good on the stage but not really always that good in my own heart. I started to wonder if my career hadn't got in the way of my vocation.' He prayed that God would guide him to where he should be.

Early one morning, a lady who had come all the way from Alabama knocked on his door and said, somewhat mysteriously, 'I've come to bring you the greetings of Jean Vanier.' Nouwen had heard a little about Vanier's work with the mentally handicapped but had never met him. The lady ended up helping Henri Nouwen for a few days, offering him remarkable hospitality in his own home! He felt God was answering his prayer.

A few years later, he left his academic career and joined L'Arche, Jean Vanier's community, in Toronto. He left the fame and prestige of Yale to help a severely-handicapped young man named Adam. After feeling very uncomfortable with this new life at the beginning, Nouwen began perceive God's presence in the midst of his growing relationship with Adam. In and through Adam, Nouwen saw a profound manifestation of the love of God. In this season of life, Nouwen reflects that he learnt three things: being is more important than doing; the heart is more important than the mind; and living in community is a lot more important than trying to do it all on your own.

In the midst of personal despair and loneliness, Nouwen has discovered great spiritual truths. It is significant to recognize that these were found not just through study but also through sustained personal interaction with those whom society has pushed to the margin. Henri Nouwen offers a commendable example of a prayer-filled, contemplative life that is found not in isolation from the world but in the place of deepest need.

### Further resources

Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1994)