

## **Twenty Fourth Sunday September 11, 2016**

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-32

In today's Gospel we are presented with an overwhelming picture of God. He is a God who is all loving and all forgiving. We might feel more comfortable with the God depicted in the First Reading, which is from the book of Exodus. This is a God who seems to be more like us while reacting to the infidelity of the people. He is angry with his chosen people and only by a kind of blackmail on Moses' part that God is moved. How can God, asks Moses, wipe out a people he has chosen and go back on his solemn promise. But the Gospel beside the stories of lost sheep and lost coin gives us the family story of the Prodigal Son, generally understood as the greatest short story in the world. The context of today's parable is very important. The Scribes and Pharisees, who considered themselves as followers of the law and self righteous, grumble that Jesus is the friend of sinners and eats with them. So Jesus tells the story about a father who is generous and forgiving. The central focus of the Parable, however, remains on the Father from the beginning to the end. The liturgy reminds us in so many ways that the reconciliation and repentance are a communal responsibility and a personal one. What unites the story and makes it powerful is the abundance of love the father shows towards both his sons. In the second reading Paul expresses his gratitude to God's mercy. He recounts the forgiveness received from God and in spite of his actions against Jesus and his followers, receives forgiveness from him.

The First Reading from the Book of Exodus we hear Moses on Mount Sinai talking to God. He was preparing to be with the people in a special way. But even as he spoke with Moses on the mountain the people encamped at the base violated the first commandment. They could no longer wait for Moses to return. They demanded Aaron to fashion an image to go before them on the journey. Their request was granted in the making of the golden calf. The Lord was upset because His chosen people were acting perversely. They had casted for themselves an image of a calf, worshipped it and sacrificed to it. Greatly offended, the God was prepared to destroy them all, indicating to Moses that He would make a great nation out of him alone. Hearing this, Moses implored God to have mercy on the sinful people, reminding Him of His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Israel. If the people were destroyed, God would have broken His promises to their forefathers. Moses did not accept this opportunity for glory and fame. Instead he interceded with God for the people. He reminded the divinity that Israel belongs to God and he alone brought them out of Egypt. God changed his mind and decided not to

destroy the people as He had originally planned. This shows the extent of the mercy that God shows on his people.

In the Second Reading from the First Letter of Paul to Timothy, we heard how the mercy of God sanctified Paul because he had a sincerity of heart. By the mercy of God, Paul, formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence, was made an example to those who would come to believe in Jesus. Paul first expresses his gratefulness to Jesus for the call he received to preach the Gospel. He was deeply aware that he was a sinner since he persecuted the church of God. Therefore he had all the more reason to be grateful for the grace that united him to Christ and made him a minister of the Gospel. He recognized that the grace of our Lord overflowed in him with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Motivated by zeal to serve God, Paul had bitterly persecuted the Church before receiving his calling. Because of the immense amount of suffering that he had created upon the Church, he possessed a large amount of gratitude towards Jesus for the mercy that had been shown toward him. It is obvious that Paul was telling his listeners that since he had been the greatest of sinners but God has shown great mercy towards him, then this should be sufficient reasons for lesser sinners to convert. Paul sees himself as a model to all believers and trusts that Christ will show the same patience towards them as he did towards him.

In this Gospel passage of today Luke has put together three parables all stressing the dynamic of lost and found. The point the evangelist is making in each case is the generous willingness God demonstrates in accepting back the repentant sinner. In the first parable the repentant sinner is symbolised in the lost sheep. The second parable focuses on the lost coin. The third parable presents a younger son and an elder son both of whom are lost. Luke makes it clear in each case, whether the man or the woman or the father, who assertively go after what is lost until found. Taking this parable from a different angle as to how Jesus looks at it, the emphasis shifts a bit. Jesus himself does not focus on what is lost so much as the extravagant behaviour of the one doing the finding. From the perspective of Jesus the finder does not require repentance for full and exuberant acceptance. He seems to prefer stressing a radical desire and openness on the part of God to joyfully accept the sinner, no matter what the sin has been. In these parables Jesus presents us with picture of God whose generosity extends beyond any human generosity we imagine. The word "angels" here refers not only to the spiritual beings who are ceaselessly at the service of God, but also, in a certain way, to all those around us who seek to facilitate our conversion: these angels are our parents, our brothers and sisters, our friends, our close relatives, everyone we meet, here and there,

throughout our life... All of them rejoice in seeing us turn our heart towards God rather than towards creatures, including ourselves.

The first two parables on lost sheep and lost coin also declare the magnitude of the mercy of God. The first parable of the Lost Sheep which echoes the prophecy of Ezekiel regarding the forgiveness of God tells us that something precious is lost. There is the search for the lost one, the shepherd finds the sheep safe and there is rejoicing. As shepherds seek out their flock when they are among their scattered sheep, so God will seek out his sheep. He will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness and will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries. He will seek the lost, and will bring back the strayed, and will bind up the injured and will strengthen the weak. The second Parable of the Lost Coin relates to us how valuable we are to God. The woman has lost something which is precious. She diligently searches for it and rejoices when she finds the lost the coin. She rejoices with her friends and neighbours after the discovery. Jesus says that there will be similar rejoicing in heaven when a soul has a change of heart and consequently receives its salvation through the grace of God. Through the dynamics of lost and found Jesus explains the value of repentance.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son we are given a most beautiful description of our heavenly Father. It is the Father who seems to be wasteful or prodigal as he is ready to give his property to his son. He is now outside the house eagerly waiting for the younger son to return. And when he does return his father runs to him, clasps him in his arms and kisses him tenderly and he brings him into the house and throws a party for him. When we return to God he throws a party for us too. Not only does he come out of the house once when he sees his older son angry, but he comes out a second time to try to persuade him to come into the house. In the same way our heavenly Father comes out to welcome each of us to his party. The most beautiful line in the parable is what the father says to the elder son, "all I have is yours". Our heavenly Father says also to us, "All I have is yours". This is a most beautiful promise and stunning invitation. We are not told at the end of the parable whether or not the elder son went in to the party. After reading this parable we also have a choice to make, whether to stay outside or to go in to enjoy the Father's party. But the best offer of happiness is from God our Father, "all I have is yours". But by the end of the story we see that both of them in different ways prove themselves to be obstacles to the family unity and harmony which the father desired more than anything. That younger son reminds us of the struggle that takes place in the society at this time to be successful. He convinces his father to give

him his share of the inheritance and squanders the whole thing in a totally irresponsible way of living. He shames his father and the family name. He degrades himself by living in a gentile country and working for a gentile employer. This son is not dumb and he knows that if he has to survive he must do something to change his life. Therefore he makes a plan to return to the father not as a son but as an employee, hoping for some work, food and shelter. This is the interior change and the repentance. He is also aware that such plan may not work since he has disgraced the family and the father may disown him. But on his return there is a surprise for him when the Father receives him back and restores him back to his former dignity of a son. Perhaps in the present day situation when we look for a change and new life we visualise ourselves to be like the younger son living with the pigs in need of returning to our Father. There in such situation we have someone waiting for us with open arms to welcome us and receive us. There is always the hope and restoration of the dignity of man.

The elder son despises his younger brother for leaving and his father for accepting him back. He is now seen as an angry and hostile person. However, again the father breaks the social custom and pleads with the elder son to come in and join the celebration. This is not just being polite. The father truly wants his elder son there because he truly loves him. The elder son is not able to understand this and the story does not tell us whether he really went to the celebration. But the story tells us that the father loved both the sons beyond every possible human level and broke all cultural boundaries. He does not care what the society will say of him. He just goes out to love and accept his sons. This is the love proclaimed by God for us in Jesus.

In fact the entire problem began with the younger son. Without waiting for his father to die he asks for his share of the inheritance. Normally the property was divided only after the death of the father. Then he abandons his duties and responsibilities in the family estate and goes abroad to live a life of fun. His reckless lifestyle drains his fortunes and he finds himself reduced to abject poverty and misery. That a Jewish prince like him should condescend to feeding pigs, which Jews regard as unclean animals, shows the depths of degradation in which he finds himself. A life away from the divine quickly enough leads people to a situation where they lose all sense of shame and decency. But no matter how far sinners move away from the father's house, the loving heart of the father always follows them, gently whispering in their hearts, "Come home. I want you. I am waiting for you." The Prodigal son decides exactly that when all is lost and chooses to go back to the Father.

The prodigal son did not get the full opportunity to fully express to his father that he would become a paid servant. The Father immediately readmits him as the part of the family and gives the order to bring the robe, the ring, and the sandals and to kill the fatted calf for a celebration. The younger son in reality had a warped notion of his father's forgiveness. He had no understanding of what mercy really means. But now he had just learnt the depth of the love of the Father. The elder son also did not know what forgiveness and love meant. He did not and could not forgive his younger brother for his misdeeds. In this parable Jesus teaches us the depth of the generosity of God and his mercy. God our heavenly Father is always waiting at the door waiting for us to come to him. At every Mass we receive the same invitation from Jesus, to share his body and blood and hence his forgiveness. The younger son needed to turn back from his frivolous lifestyle and return to the father's house and be a responsible and obedient son. In our life we often regret that the other is more privileged and gets more benefits than us. Often we are hurt and indignant like the elder brother in the parable. We indeed have missed the point. It is not about who is more or less deserving in a given situation. It is our ability to love unconditionally and to believe in the basic dignity and equality of all people.

The fact is that it is a marvelous story and we usually call the "Prodigal Son" or wasteful son. But, as has often been pointed out, it is rather the story of the Prodigally Generous Father. It is the father who is the central figure. He gives generously to his younger son who wastes it totally. This son finally comes to his senses, and shamefully makes his way home; he is overwhelmed by his father's love and affection. Nothing is too good to be brought out to celebrate the return of the boy who "was dead and has come to life again". This is a picture of love and forgiveness we might find difficult to imitate. Yet God does it for each one of us. It is likely that most of us can identify easily with the elder son who is good and is dutifully serving his father without any thought of personal reward. Naturally, he resents at the extraordinary treatment his "black sheep" of a brother gets. He cannot understand it and in fact he hates it all. But we have a God who is generous he defines sinner as one who is ready to listen to him. The message is abundantly clear: God loves everyone and wishes them to turn to him.

One summer evening after a festal hour of singing and dancing the whole tribe sat around the chieftain. He began to speak to them: "If you have quarreled with a brother and you have decided to kill him," as he spoke he looked directly at the one of the group, "first sit down, fill your pipe and smoke it. When you have finished

smoking you will realize that death is too severe a punishment for your enemy for the fault he has committed, and you decide to give a good whipping instead. Then you fill your pipe a second time and smoke it to the bottom. By then you feel that the lashes will be too much and instead some simple words of reproof would be sufficient. Then when the third time you have filled your pipe and smoked it to the finish, you will be better convinced that the better thing to do is to go to that brother and embrace him.

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