

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time C - God's True Opinion of Sinners

September 11, 2022.

This Sunday's Gospel reading, in the long version (Luke 15:1-32) includes the well-preached parable of the prodigal son, so I focus on the two parables in the short Version (Luke 15:1-10) which teach us more about the heart of God than a whole library of theological treatises. **They show us vividly that God cares about each one of us: he will not rest if only one sheep is missing, or one coin is lost.** They show us that he cares deeply enough to go out of his way to save us when we are lost: it was certainly unthinkable to go after the one foolish stray sheep at the risk of losing the ninety-nine, or waste the time to light the lamp and sweep the entire house trying to find the one lost coin. **They show that God wouldn't mind "wasting" his time to look for us and rejoices when we return to him, as the shepherd rejoices upon retrieving his sheep, and as the woman rejoices upon recovering her coin - every sinner who returns to God causes a joyful celebration to break out in the halls of heaven and the heart of the Father.** This portrait of goodness is set in high relief by the contrary attitude of the Pharisees, whose self-righteous and judgmental comments provided the occasion for these parables. **If the Pharisees had possessed Christ's power and authority, they would have destroyed all "sinners." But Christ uses his power and authority to bring sinners back into communion with God.** The Pharisees see God as harsh and judgmental, when the truth is that God is a dedicated shepherd. God doesn't want to condemn sinners. He wants them back. The Pharisees can't understand this, because they have painted their image of God in their own likeness. They enjoy condemning others for being less perfect than themselves, because it feeds their vanity, making them feel superior. But the Lord has no vanity, only love.

This limitless and entirely selfless desire to save sinners was revealed most fully by Christ on the cross, but it is also the main theme behind every other episode in salvation history. In the First Reading (Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14) Moses had been up on the mountain in prayer, receiving the Law from God's own hands, the Israelites down in the valley had lost hope and abandoned their faith. Instead of continuing to trust in the God who had already done so many miracles to save them from slavery and lead them to safety, they gave up on God. They rebelled against him, turned their backs on him, and built an idol out of gold. From the Pharisees' perspective, God should have simply destroyed them. That's the natural view of things, which God seems to adopt in his conversation with Moses, when he says he is going to destroy these faithless, stiff-necked people. But God doesn't mean it. He is only testing Moses. And Moses passes the test. Moses has just spent weeks in prayer, in God's presence. He has been faithful to God's will through some very difficult times. And so, by this point in his life, Moses has come to understand **the heart of God, a heart built for forgiveness.** Knowing this, Moses doesn't hesitate to pray for his people. He knows they deserve punishment, but he knows that **God wants to give them another chance, and so he asks confidently for that, and God grants his prayer.** This is a rough, Old Testament sketch, of the God who was already planning to send his Son to take upon himself the punishment that sinners deserved. Our God doesn't dish out his mercy drop by drop from an eye-dropper. Our God showers us with his patience, forgiveness, and love - like a waterfall.

This is the lesson that St Paul tries to explain to Timothy in the Second Reading (1 Timothy 1:12-17). He is telling his disciple, Timothy, about his own experience of Christ. And he emphasizes Christ's patience and mercy. He actually sums up Christ's entire mission with one short sentence: *"This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: **Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.**"* Paul knows this, because he recognizes that he himself is a "foremost" sinner, and yet God singled him out for a great mission, and gave him an abundant

experience of his grace. **Paul had been a violent persecutor of Christians. He had been intent on destroying Christians, on putting them to death for blasphemy. He had been a Pharisee. Now, having experienced Christ's mercy and grace, he has become the apostle of forgiveness.**

The good shepherd was one of the favourite figures in early Christian art. It is an image that God uses to describe himself throughout the history of salvation, in the Old Testament as well as the New. If we pause to let our imaginations explore it, it will help us appreciate this message of God's tireless mercy. Picture the scene: A shepherd counts his sheep after a long day of grazing, as the sun goes down. One is missing. He counts again. Yes, one sheep has wandered away from the flock. High on the mountainside pasture, the air is already getting cold as daylight fades. The flock huddles together. The shepherd leads them into a natural hollow under an overhanging cliff. He turns around and retraces his steps; he sets out to find the lost sheep. He stumbles over sharp rocks in the lengthening shadows. He has to climb off the path, pushing through brambles and thorns. He pulls his cloak tighter around him to keep out the chill. It starts to drizzle. Will the wolves come out in the rain? There is no moon tonight, and the clouds block out the stars. Maybe he should turn back while he can still find his way. He will come and search for the lost sheep in the morning... A wolf howls; the morning may be too late. He trudges on. The mud is slippery. The wind picks up. Water drips down the back of his neck. Soon he is soaked to the skin. The night crawls on. He will find his sheep. That's what matters. He is a good shepherd. God is tireless in seeking out sinners. It is comforting to know that should we stray away our good loving shepherd eagerly and anxiously goes out of his way to find us and takes us back. **This is what Jesus wants us to have in mind when we find ourselves lost, stuck in our sins, separated from him and from others. He wants us to see him as our Saviour, not as our accuser.**

Brothers and sisters, it is sometimes hard for our fallen human nature to see God's mercy clearly. We tend to be judgmental, so we also tend to project that - wrongly - onto God. This wrong conception can be detrimental to our maturity and peace of mind. It puts a wall around our own hearts, so that God's love can't reach in and transform us. And it also puts a wall between us and other people. **We become so fixated on their flaws that we become blind to their true value as God's children.** There is no easy way to tear down these walls. We have to do it, with the help of God's grace, one brick at a time. But the more bricks we take down, the easier it gets - the wall gets weaker as it loses bricks. We can make progress in this area by doing two things. First, by using frequently the sacrament of confession: the mercy and forgiveness we experience there helps us to be more merciful and understanding toward others. Second, by purifying our critical thoughts. We actually have control over which thoughts we pay attention to. For example, when we notice the dedication of someone we work with and feel a sense of admiration, that's a worthy thought. We should dwell on it, feed it, and draw strength from it. But when we catch ourselves looking down on someone, or when we start to feel dislike for someone because they do better than we do, those are unworthy thoughts, and we should turn away from them. This mental discipline is one of the most important factors in our spiritual growth. This week, when critical and judgmental thoughts come knocking, let's purposely send them away - even if they try to batter down the door to our mind. And let's welcome and entertain the good thoughts, the ones that reflect God's own thoughts. If we try, Christ will help us - after all, that's what good shepherds do. **"Yesterday is already a dream and tomorrow is only a vision but today well-lived makes every yesterday a dream of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope"** God bless you all.