

## TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

*Gospel: Luke 15:1-32*

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe-the best one-and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

## REFLECTION 1:

## RECOVERING THE LOST

In her novel, 'Five for sorrow, Ten for joy', which some of you may have read, - the author, Rumer Godden tells an appealing tale. The heroine of the story is Lisa, an English army girl, what we used to call a wren, who falls upon hard times and becomes a call girl after the liberation of Paris in World War 2. Within a short time she becomes a leading Madame in one Paris' smartest brothels owned by a man named Patrice. But Patrice soon tires of Madame Lisa as his mistress, and so she is humiliated. Then, in trying to help a younger prostitute to escape from the same fate she herself has suffered; Lisa shoots and kills Patrice. She is tried and sent to prison. There, in a penitentiary outside Paris, she comes into contact with the French Dominican Sisters of Bethany. This is a community dedicated to the pastoral care of ladies of the night, drug addicts and vagrants. Some of the sisters were once themselves such as unfortunates – and so Lisa after serving her long sentence, becomes one of the sisters of Bethany.

Sister Lisa is an archetype, a model if you like, of the lost sheep and the lost coin In today's twin parables. She was wayward and lost, but through the Dominican Sisters of Bethany, Jesus went searching for her – and when he found her, he embraced her, took her in his arms and invited her to become his spouse, a nun.

Who would deny that there was more joy in heaven and on earth when Jesus found Lisa, than over 99 of us who have never been lost in that way? Does that mean that God loves the 99 less? Surely not; just as parents do not love their children less when a particular child is sick or disabled and needs to be temporarily lavished with more love. Jesus' two parables are so simple that it is easy to miss out on how sublime they are. So, just let me draw your attention to some of their significant details.

First of all, take the chief actors of each story. A shepherd in Jesus' time was reckoned among the 'sinners'. With the great scarcity of grazing land, he was suspected of driving his flocks onto neighbouring property and embezzling the increase. A woman in Jesus' day, in a male dominated patriarchal society, was regarded as a second-class citizen – a mere property of men. So, Jesus was really revolutionary when he used the examples of these two people to play the role of God in his parables. It is as if Jesus asked, 'Do you want to know what God is like? Then look at the shepherd and the woman in my stories'.

Then there was the value of what was lost. One sheep did not cost much, but at the same time it would be utterly helpless to find its way home from the wilderness. Eventually it would fall prey to starvation or to a wolf. The lost coin in the other parable was probably part of the woman's dowry and represented her most precious possession and future security.

For us, the sheep and the coin, denote our unique worth as individuals in the sight of God. Society may dehumanise us, computers reduce us to a digit and statistics to anonymity – but never God. We are always precious and of supreme value in his eyes.

Finally, there's the intensity of the search. With great persistence, the shepherd leaves the rest of the flock and wanders through cliffs and crags until he finds it. The woman on the other hand, lights a candle and relentlessly sweeps the house till she recovers her precious coin.

No matter how deep we fall or how far we wander, God never gives up on us. He is this tremendous lover, the one who searches for us with steadfast tenacity until he finds us. Ultimately, there is joy in finding what was lost. The expression 'there was joy in heaven' and 'there is joy among the angels' are both expressions of God's intense feelings. In other words, God is the one who rejoices when the lost are found and sinners repent. Our God is a God who rejoices when sinners are saved, delights when we do the right thing, and finds joy in being generous with his mercy. Lisa learned that lesson late in life and maybe for us it's not too late.

## REFLECTION 2:

## MERCIFUL, VISCERAL LOVE

When he inaugurated the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis said, "We want to live this Jubilee Year in light of the Lord's words, merciful like the Father". In his Gospel, the Lucan Jesus makes a similar plea, 'Be merciful just as your Father is merciful' (Lc. 6: 36). Luke challenges all would be disciples to put it into practice. That same theme is reflected in each of the sacred texts today.

The Pharisees to whom these parables were addressed were claiming that Jesus welcomed sinners and even ate in their company. God, they asserted, had no dealings with sinners so each of these parables challenge that assumption. In all these stories the sinner is someone who strays from where he/she belongs. The first two parables suggest that it isn't the sinner who refuses to return but that it is God who positively seeks the sinner out. Even though the Prodigal Son does decide to return, the father is on the lookout for him and runs out to meet him. Far from refusing to have any dealings with sinners, it's God who takes the initiative in finding the sinner and welcoming him/her home.

The notion of a welcome for sinners went totally against the expectations of the Pharisees and it may affect ours as well. Like the erring son in the parable, we expect to grovel before God when we have sinned - to prepare a long speech, expressing our abject repentance and our willingness to be faithful servants from now on. But these expectations aren't fulfilled - the Prodigal Son isn't allowed to get beyond the opening words of his carefully prepared speech. He has come home and that is all that matters to his father. I think it is helpful to think of repentance in that way - as a homecoming - a rediscovery of where we truly belong. The father understood that his son had to make the discovery of his wretchedness for himself.

Perhaps we may think that the story of the Prodigal Son should end there with the homecoming, the father and son living happily ever after. But it doesn't, and we are now introduced to the elder son who stands for the forces of justice, morality and common sense. He is a good and dutiful son who has never put a foot wrong. But like the Pharisees, he lacks basic humanity. He doesn't understand the love and welcome his father lavishes because his younger brother has returned home, and he gives his reasons why.

If the parable is to make its full impact on us, we must ask ourselves how much of the elder brother is in us. A cold, calculating attitude that insists on justice and punishment for the wrongdoer is not the way of Jesus. We are not told whether the father's words melted the heart of the elder son - but they should affect ours - 'My son (my daughter) you are with me always and all I have is yours. But it is only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother (sister) here was dead and has come to life, he (she) was lost and is found' (Adapted v/s 31/32).

God doesn't love us globally but individually - each of us in a special personal way. God's love is a rejoicing love - total joy with no admixture of rebuke.