

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ord. Time C/2013

The readings of this Sunday talk about God's mercy and forgiveness. They show that God's love for us is so immense that he rejoices anytime a sinner abandons his past life and turns back to him. They also invite us to trust God's mercy and to make amend of our sins.

The first reading describes the sin of Israel following their exit from Egypt. It shows how the people made a molten calf and worshiped it and sacrificed to it as though it was a god. It shows also how, in spite of God's resolve to punish them, he restrained and forgave them, thanks to the supplication of Moses.

What is behind this text is the idea that human beings forget very easily the good deeds God has done for them and give in to sin. Another idea is the truth anytime that a man of God wants to act like anybody else, forgetting who he is and where he comes from, he loses his very identity in sinning. The text teaches us also that, in spite of our sins, God is always ready to forgive us anytime we call upon him.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus talks about God's mercy through the parables of a lost sheep and that of a lost coin. First of all, the Gospel starts with the mention of tax collectors and sinners who were approaching Jesus and the bad perception that Pharisees and Scribes had about that.

In reaction, Jesus gives two parables in which he describes the attitude of his Father with regard to sinners. First, Jesus talks about a man who had a hundred sheep, but lost one of them. He left the ninety-nine in the stall and went after the lost until he found it.

Once he found it, he put it on his shoulders and came back home with great joy and celebrated with his neighbors. For Jesus, there is a similar joy in heaven when just one sinner repents.

Then, Jesus talks about a woman who had ten coins, but lost one in her home. She lit the lamp and swept the house until she found it. After finding it, she called neighbors and friends and rejoiced over it. Again for Jesus, in the same way, there is a great joy in heaven among the angels of God when just one sinner converts.

What do we learn from this Gospel? The point I want to bring today is about the value of each individual and the forgiving heart of God. In both parables, one thing that strikes is the fact that the shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep in the stall and runs after the lost one. In the same way, the woman is concerned for the lost coin while she had still nine more beside.

Why do the man and the woman do so? They do so because, though they had some other sheep and coins, those lost were important in their sight. Each taken individually was so important to them that they could not accept to lose them.

As these parables are meant to teach us something about the reign of God, the point they highlight is that each one of us taken individually is important to God. In that sense, no one has the right to underestimate himself. Even if we might be rejected by people because of our faults or the wrongs we have done in the course of our life, we still count

a lot for God. He is able to look after us and he wants us to be part of his flock or be counted among his coins.

Because we count a lot for God, it means that God is disposed to forgive us whatever we might have done. That is why in the starting point of the Gospel, Jesus welcomes tax collectors and sinners without being afraid about their status or what the Pharisees and Scribes think about them. He does not even care about their criticism toward him, because he knows very well that there is a lot at stake. And when the parables talk about being lost, literally it means to be astray from God, to live far from his grace.

In that sense, any return to God and conversion is a motive of joy in heaven. When we renounce our bad behaviors and sins, God, who looks at us from heaven, is happy that we, his sons and daughters, are able to act so for the glory of his name and our eternal salvation. It means also that God's love for us is so big that when we change and come back to him, he forgives us, no matter what we have done. That is the foundation of our hope for eternal life, namely that the infinite love of God will never be broken, that his love will never be overcome by our infidelity, no matter how grave it is.

What is the consequence of all that? The first is about the image of God. In fact, God is compassionate, merciful and forgiving. Like the woman who is preoccupied for the lost coin, God wants us back to him. Like the shepherd who cares for the lost sheep, God is not happy until he finds us again. As St Augustine says, "you have created us for you Oh Lord; and our heart is never in peace until it finds you".

The second is about our situation before God. Because, God loves us, he does not lock us in our sins. He always gives us a second chance. In that sense, no one can say that it is too late for him. Even if we have remorse and feel guilty for what we have done in the past, there is still a chance, because we are still alive and not dead. Sometimes we need to forgive ourselves in order to enjoy God's forgiveness.

But, the big problem we have, and that is the challenge we face on a daily basis, can we accept the grace that God gives us today and return to him. That is why we should always remember that conversion requires the courage to break with our mortal past. The more God forgives, the more he wants us to change. Why would he leave us the sacrament of confession if it were not in order to reconcile us with him and with our fellows?

This is very important, because, there is a tendency to think that we still have time; but, who knows how much time we still have? As I often say, who knows if the opportunity we miss today will come again. Why shall we put off for tomorrow what we can do for today? Let us pray, then, that God may give us the courage to renounce our sins. Let us go back to him and trust his love for us. May God bless you!

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



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