

**GOSPEL**

LUKE 15:1-32

The tax collectors and the sinners were all seeking the company of Jesus to hear what he had to say, and the Pharisees and the scribes complained. 'This man' they said 'welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he spoke this parable to them:

'What man among you with a hundred sheep, losing one, would not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the missing one till he found it? And when he found it, would he not joyfully take it on his shoulders and then, when he got home, call together his friends and neighbours? "Rejoice with me," he would say "I have found my sheep that was lost." In the same way, I tell you, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine virtuous men who have no need of repentance.

'Or again, what woman with ten drachmas would not, if she lost one, light a lamp and sweep out the house and search thoroughly till she found it? And then, when she had found it, call together her friends and neighbours? "Rejoice with me," she would say "I have found the drachma I lost." In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing among the angels of God over one repentant sinner.'

He also said, 'A man had two sons. The younger said to his father, "Father, let me have the share of the estate that would come to me." So the father divided the property between them. A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery.

'When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch, so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled his belly with the husks the pigs were eating but no one offered him anything. Then he came to his senses and said, "How many of my father's paid servants have more food than they want, and here am I dying of

hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your paid servants." So he left the place and went back to his father.

'While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him tenderly. Then his son said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we are going to have a feast, a celebration, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found." And they began to celebrate.

'Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about. "Your brother has come" replied the servant, "and your father has killed the calf we had fattened because he has got him back safe and sound." He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out to plead with him; but he answered his father, "Look, all these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed your orders, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property - he and his women - you kill the calf we had been fattening."

'The father said, "My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found."

The Gospel of the Lord.

**A REFLECTION  
BY POPE FRANCIS**

Today's Gospel passage begins with several people criticizing Jesus, upon seeing him in the company of tax collectors and sinners, and they scornfully say: "This man receives sinners and eats with them". In reality, this statement turns out to be a marvelous announcement. Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. It is what happens to us at every Mass, in every Church: Jesus is happy to welcome us to his table where he offers himself for us. It is a statement that we could inscribe on Church doors: "Here Jesus welcomes sinners and invites them to his table". And in response to those who were criticizing him, Jesus tells three parables, three wonderful parables that reveal his preference for those who feel distant from him. Today, it would be nice if each of you would take up the Gospel of Luke and read the three parables. They are wonderful.

The first parable says: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it?". What man of you? Not a person with good sense: he does the math and sacrifices the one to keep the ninety-nine. Whereas God does not give up. He cherishes precisely you who still do not know the beauty of his love; you who have not yet welcomed Jesus into the centre of your life; you who are unable to overcome your sin; you who, perhaps due to the bad things that have happened in your life, do not believe in love. In the second parable, you are that small coin that the Lord does not accept losing, and he searches relentlessly. He wants to tell you that you are precious in his eyes, that you are unique. No one can replace you in God's heart. You have a place; you are you, and no one can replace you; nor me, no one can replace me in God's heart. And in the third parable, God is the father who awaits the return of his prodigal son. God always awaits us. He does not tire,

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he does not lose heart. Because we, each one of us is that son embraced once again, that rediscovered coin, that sheep caressed and put back upon his shoulder. He waits every day for us to perceive his love. And you say: “But I have done my share of things, I have done too much!”. Do not be afraid. God loves you; he loves you as you are and knows that his love alone can change your life.

But this infinite love of God for us sinners, which is the heart of the Gospel, can be rejected. It is what the elder son in the parable does. He does not understand love in that moment and he has in mind more of a master than a father. It is also a risk for us: to believe in a more rigorous than merciful god, a god who defeats evil with power rather than with forgiveness. It is not so. God saves with love, not with force: offering himself, not imposing himself. But the elder son, who does not accept the father’s mercy, withdraws; he makes a greater mistake. He thinks he is just; he presumes he has been betrayed and he judges everything on the basis of his concept of justice. Thus he becomes angry with his brother and rebukes the father: “You killed the fatted calf when this son of yours came”. This son of yours: he does not call him my brother, but rather, your son. He feels like an only child. We too are mistaken when we believe we are just, when we think the others are bad. Let us not think we are good, because on our own, without the help of God who is good, we do not know how to defeat evil. Today, do not forget to take up the Gospel and read the three parables of Luke, Chapter 15. It will do you good; it will be healthy for you.

How can we defeat evil? By welcoming God’s forgiveness and the forgiveness of our brothers and sisters. It happens each time we go to confession: there we receive the love of God, which conquers our sin. It no longer exists. God forgets it. When God forgives, he loses his memory, he forgets our sins, he forgets. God is so good to us! Unlike we who, after saying “it’s okay”, remember “with interest” the harm

done to us, at the very first opportunity. No, God erases evil, he makes us new inside and thus enables joy to be reborn within us, not sadness, not darkness in our heart, not suspicion, but joy.

Brothers and sisters, take courage. With God, no sin has the last word. May Our Lady who unties the knots of life, free us from the presumption of believing we are just, and make us feel the need to go to the Lord who always awaits us to embrace us, to forgive us.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- When was the last time you made heaven rejoice – through honest, freeing self-examination and repentance?
- Which of these parables speaks most profoundly to you today? Why?
- These parables are an urgent call to reach out to the disconnected -to evangelise, and seek the lost by sharing our story. How and with whom can you share the joy and freedom that comes from the forgiveness and mercy you’ve experienced in your own life?

### PRAYER

*Spend some time in prayer with one another*

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. “Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray”)
3. Move to prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others’ prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps reciting the ‘Glory Be’ or similar prayer.