

THE GOD OF THE LOST: 24TH SUNDAY C

Day after day the Jesus we meet in the gospels shows pastoral care for all sorts of people. But he singles out poor unfortunate persons for special affection. They even include extortionists like Zacchaeus, and prostitutes. This draws contempt from his opponents, who openly sneer: 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them' (Lk 15:2).

The warmth and generosity of his human caring and welcome show that in the eyes of God they are not 'rejects', 'outcasts', losers' and 'no-hopers'. On the contrary, God wants to put them back together again. So in and through Jesus, those labelled the 'lost' come to meet the God of the lost. It's for their sake and in their defence, that Jesus speaks his famous parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.

The story of the lost son, the most famous just shared, has been called 'the greatest short story in the world'. It's not really the parable of a prodigal, i.e. of a spendthrift, as it's usually called, but the parable of an incredibly generous father of two sons (see v.11), who in different ways have both lost their way in life.

The parable tells us a great deal about Jesus himself. His own way of acting is the starting-point of the story. He's explaining why he 'welcomes sinners and eats with them' (v.2). They're the lost ones, the ones he's bringing home to God. For Jesus, all persons who have strayed from God are not truly themselves. So, in the midst of his failures and mistakes the lost son comes to understand that he will be happy again only in the company and home of his father. Meanwhile his father is longing for him to return, and as soon as he catches a glimpse of his son returning, he starts running along the road to embrace his son and walk him home (v.20).

On reaching the house, the father cuts short the son's prepared speech. There's no reprimand, not even a small dose of 'I told you so...' There's no pay-back, no penance, no punishment and no recriminations. Instead the father is so glad to have his son back with him that he presents him with the robe of honour, the ring of authority, and the sandals of a son.

The Pharisees, to whom Jesus was telling this story, would have been shocked to the core at how Jesus was keeping company with people who were not only outsiders but filthy 'sinners', contact with whom would bring defilement. In a sadistic way they were looking forward not to the saving but to the destruction of those whom they so easily and so self-righteously labelled 'sinners'.

At the sound of music and dancing the eldest son comes in from the fields. His father goes out to him and pleads with him to come to the party (v.38). This eldest son believes he has done everything 'right', and has spent his whole life slaving away on the family farm. His attitude to his wayward brother is one of utter contempt. He even calls the prodigal one not 'my brother' but 'your son'.

In the details of his story, Jesus is saying that our God is not a mean book-keeping God at all, but a warm, gracious and generous Father who never stops loving, simply because he never stops wanting to save. No matter how often we may turn our backs on God and go away to do our own selfish thing, God, as in the story, waits patiently for us to come to our senses and come back home. The moment we start to admit that our selfishness has brought us only frustration, misery, shame, guilt, and self-loathing, God comes running to hug us and take us back. There he treats us not as our mistakes and sins deserve, but with mercy, compassion, and tenderness. In the Eucharist he even throws a party and lavishes the richest of 'welcome home' gifts upon us- Jesus Christ himself in his body and blood.

In conclusion, let me share with you a variation on the story Jesus told. Once there were two priests in the same diocese. One of them drank too much, he was often late for appointments, the parish was deep in debt and his bookwork was a mess. Yet the people loved him. The other priest was a very capable and careful manager. He was meticulous and exact in everything. His book-keeping was impeccable and he always treated everyone according to all the rules and regulations of the diocese. His parish had no debt. In fact, it owned substantial investments. Yet his people didn't think much of him or warm to him at all.

That's simply amazing. It seems unfair. It begs the question: 'What on earth did the first priest have going for him that the second one lacked?'

Let's try and figure that one out for ourselves!

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