

**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 liturgy brings us to Chapter 15 of the Gospel of Luke, considered the chapter on mercy. It relates three parables with which Jesus responds to the grumbling of the scribes and the Pharisees, who are criticizing his actions, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them".

With these three stories, Jesus wants to make us understand that God the Father is the first one to have a welcoming and merciful attitude toward sinners. This is God's attitude.

In the first parable, God is presented as a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to go and look for the one that is lost. In the second, he is compared to a woman who has lost a coin and searches until she finds it. In the third parable, God is imagined as a father who welcomes the son who had distanced himself; the figure of the father reveals the heart of a merciful God, manifested in Jesus.

A common element in these parables is expressed by the verbs that mean rejoice together, join in merry-making. Mourning is not spoken of; there is rejoicing, there is celebrating. The shepherd calls his friends and neighbours and says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost" (v 6). The woman calls her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost" (v. 9). And the father says to his other son: "It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found".

In the first two parables, the focus is on the joy that is so uncontainable that it must be shared with "friends and neighbours". In the third parable, the focus is on the joy that springs from the heart of the merciful father and expands to the whole household. God's rejoicing over those who return to Him repentant is intoned as never before in this Jubilee Year that we are living, as the term itself expresses: "jubilee", that is, jubilation!

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With these three parables, Jesus presents to us the true face of God, a God with open arms, a God who deals with sinners with tenderness and compassion. The parable that is most moving for everyone — because it manifests the infinite love of God — is that of the father who enfolds in a close embrace the son who has been found. What strikes us is not so much the sad story of a youth who falls into dissolute ways, but rather his decisive words, “I will arise and go to my father”.

The path to return home is the path of hope and new life. God always expects us to resume our journey, he awaits us with patience, he sees us when we are still a long way off, he runs to meet us, he embraces us, he kisses us, he forgives us. That is how God is. That is how our Father is. And his forgiveness cancels the past and regenerates us in love. Forgetting the past — this is God’s weakness. When he embraces us, he forgives us, and forgets it. He doesn’t remember. He forgets the past. When we sinners convert and let ourselves be re-encountered by God, reproach and sternness do not await us, because God saves, he welcomes us home again with joy and prepares a feast.

Jesus himself in today’s Gospel says, “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance”.

Let me ask you a question: Have you ever thought about how each time we go to the confessional, there is joy and celebration in heaven? Have you ever thought about this? It’s beautiful.

This fills us with a great hope because there is no sin into which we may have fallen, from which, with the grace of God, we cannot rise up again. There is never a person who can’t be recovered; no one is irrecoverable, because God never stops wanting our good — even when we sin!

May the Virgin Mary, Refuge of Sinners, kindle in our hearts the confidence that was lit in the heart of the prodigal son: “I will arise and go to my father and I shall say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you’”. On this path, we can give glory to God, and his glory can become his celebration, and ours.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When was the last time you made heaven rejoice through honest, freeing self-examination and repentance?
2. Which of these parables speaks most profoundly to you today? Why?
3. 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.