

Lost Sons & Searching Fathers

24th Sunday of the Year – Cycle C – 15 September 2019

Readings: Ex 32:7-11,13-14; 1 Tim 1:12-17; Lk 15:1-32

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (Paul)

Three Scriptural Signposts

The ‘lost and found’ theme can be developed to link the three readings with one another. In the first reading, the Israelites lose their way; in the second, Saul confesses his former sinful state of being ‘lost’; and, in the gospel reading we have three parables referring to ‘lost and found’: sheep, coin and son.

1. The first reading speaks of a ‘lost people’. Despite the fact that Yahweh loves them, chooses them and leads them from slavery in Egypt to freedom by showing them mighty signs and wonders, they stray away from God and “have been quick to turn aside from the way that I [God] commanded them” (v.8). Indeed, in just forty days that Moses left them leaderless, they long for some visible and tangible ‘object of worship’ and fashion a golden calf for themselves. God’s wrath flares out against these “stiff-necked people” and the divine intention is to destroy the apostatizing Israelites since they are unmindful of God’s power and ungrateful about God’s goodness. By contrast, Moses—God’s prophet and the people’s pastor and mediator—suffers much and is deeply pained by his people’s apostasy. Like a father pleading for mercy for his wayward offspring, Moses intercedes on behalf of his people, reminding God, so to say, of a line of ‘faith-full’ ancestors: Abraham, Isaac and Israel (Jacob). As a result of Moses’ goodness and godliness, God “changed his mind” and the people are spared. This event is mentioned in Ps 106:23 and foreshadows the salvific work of Christ who intercedes for us, sinners. Doesn’t Jesus stand, crucified, pleading for God’s mercy on his persecutors: “Father, forgive them”?
2. In the second reading Paul expresses a *mea culpa* to one of his convert-confreres, Timothy, who converted to Christianity during Paul’s first missionary journey (47–49 AD). Timothy remained a devoted disciple of Christ and Paul’s faithful follower through thick and thin of his second and third missionary journeys. Paul confesses his sinful past as a “blasphemer” who sought to “injure and discredit the faith.” However, his sinfulness is contrasted to God’s “overflowing grace,” which makes him tell others never to doubt that, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” This is the great truth that Timothy, too, must preach. This is truly the Good News and thus there is need to give “honour and glory” to the “king of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God ... Amen!”
3. Jesus narrates the three parables of the three ‘lost and found’ entities—sheep, coin, son—in the context of the presence and comment of proud “Pharisees and scribes” who “were grumbling and saying: ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them’.” (v.2). To eat with anyone symbolizes companionship and friendship. Jesus purposefully has ‘table-fellowship’ with these so-called ‘sinners’ in order to show the holier-than-thou hypocrites, the Pharisees, that God is merciful, compassionate and forgiving to all those who realize their sinfulness and turn towards him in repentant love. Liturgists might be tempted to take

the 'shorter form' and omit the third parable (lost son) since it has already been reflected upon earlier (see my reflection of the 4th Sunday of Lent on March 31, 2019, entitled 'Turnaround towards Prodigal Fathers'). This should be avoided since all three parables do *not* focus on the lost sheep, coin and son so much as on the "seeking and finding" shepherd, widow and father. The father suffers to see his younger son ruining himself by 'getting lost' with reckless, loose living. Therefore, upon deciding to return, "while he was still far off" (v.20), his father saw him, "was filled with compassion, he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him" (ibid.). Reflecting upon this totally unexpected behaviour of the father, rather than merely feel rotten about our sinful state, there's also need to rejoice about my/our redeemed existence.... Indeed, God truly loves, *me*, sinner, unconditionally! The prodigality and craziness of the shepherd, widow and father is in their leaving the ninety-sheep shepherd-less simply to go after one sheep, and in the widow's/father's strange 'wastefulness', so to say, to throw parties when a coin or a shameless son is found! Where is there justice and moderation in this? Don't we often feel 'with' and 'for' the elder son?

Linking the Psalm to the Theme:

Psalm 51 is a poignant prayer of a penitent sinner. However, relating it to the first reading, we can also think of it as being uttered by Christ in his capacity as Mediator. Christ takes our sin upon himself even to the extent of confessing our sin on our behalf. This is what's meant by: "Christ atones for our sins."

Three Current Concerns:

The golden calf – is something that you and I mould with our ego, our wealth, our physique, our talents, our beauty, our successes, our intellect and everything else that becomes a substitute for God and a hindrance to salvation.

The straying sheep – is you and me. There are so many distractions that entice us and make us go astray. We get 'lost' with little things that really don't matter. Thanks to the 'Lamb of God' our Mediator who is a go-between heaven and earth, a mediator, who carries us on his shoulders and leads us back to the safety of the Good Shepherd's sheepfold.

The pharisaic concern is the critic and the hypocrite within us. While the pharisees cannot understand *why* "This fellow eats with sinners ...", the elder son fails to understand *why* "His father kills the fatted calf and feasts with the sinner-son ...". For both these types, cold justice is the only rule – there's absolutely no place with them for mercy and forgiveness.

In Lighter Vein: It's said that we're connected to God as if tied to Him with a string. When we lose our way and go astray, it's like cutting the string and losing our connection with Him. But, like the searching shepherd finding that lost sheep, God comes after us and makes a knot with the string, tying us up with Him, once again. The more often we cut the string and go astray, the more God comes after us to tie the string—thereby making the string shorter and shorter, and bringing us closer and closer to Him! That should not encourage us to keep cutting the string; but we ought to be grateful to God for reconnecting us to Godself. Oh, happy fault! O necessary sin of Adam—that won for us so great, a savior!
