

- SEPTEMBER 11, 2022

Every three years, Holy Church gives us all of chapter 15 of St. Luke's Gospel at Sunday Mass. In this chapter are three parables of Divine Mercy. St. Luke puts these three of the Lord's parables together to drive in an essential point. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is a God of Mercy.

The Mercy of God is certainly found in the Old Testament, and in the rest of the New Testament. No other Biblical text, however, so emphasizes Divine Mercy as does St. Luke's Gospel. The emphasis on Divine Mercy in St. Luke's Gospel is so insistent that the great Pope John Paul, in one of his finest encyclicals, "Dives in Misericordia - Rich in Mercy", calls the Gospel of Luke "The Gospel of Mercy" Nothing is more essential to our spiritual life than absorbing the message that God truly is merciful, grasping the full and challenging implications of Divine Mercy, and living them out.

Chapter 15 of St. Luke's Gospel begins with a complaint from the Pharisees and Scribes. The Scribes were religious professionals, men whose business it was to copy out Israel's Sacred Scriptures. Dedicated on most days of the year to copying the Sacred texts, and on Sabbaths and holy days to praying with those texts, the Scribes were naturally regarded as experts on the Scriptures. The Pharisees were laymen, that faction within Israel that was most insistent on taking Israel's sacred law seriously. The Scribes and Pharisees were not, as we might put it, "the bad guys". Surely it is good to be familiar with the Sacred Scriptures! Surely it is good to take the holy Law seriously!

Yet these men, good men in some important ways, quarreled with Jesus of Nazareth again and again. There is something deeply tragic about this. Good men rejected the Best Man. Good men rejected the Son of Man. What was the problem?

The problem is one that has at times, down through the centuries, afflicted the Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Taking the Moral Law seriously, as Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ most certainly should, they have fallen into the temptation of supposing that taking the Moral Law seriously means being harsh about it. In that harshness, they have sometimes forgotten that the worst imaginable sinner can be so moved by God's Grace as to become a Saint. Indeed, they have sometimes forgotten that human beings can be capable simultaneously of serious sin and of genuine goodness. Their serious sins do not destroy the value of their good deeds. The attitude of the Lord Jesus was one of preferring to notice the good deeds more than the sins. It is in that spirit that he praised the sinful woman who honored Him by anointing His feet and drying them with her hair. It is in that spirit that St. Paul, in chapter 1 of Philippians, recognized that even self interested preachers can do good when they preach Jesus Christ.

The Scribes and Pharisees were alarmed that Jesus ate with serious sinners. In that culture, a meal was a sacred thing that began and ended with prayer (a good practice still!). They did not see how they could eat with people who could not fully join in Israel's worship. Jesus did not eat with disreputable people to endorse their sins, of course. He ate with them to make clear that

there is a certain vehemence to Divine Mercy. The Scribes and Pharisees knew perfectly well that the Lord is willing to forgive repentant sinners. What they did not grasp is that the Lord wants to seek out repentant sinners. Jesus ate with sinners to seek them out, neither merely denouncing their sins, which is too easy to do, nor merely accepting their sins, which is also all too easy to do. Jesus committed Himself to the more difficult, truly just, and merciful task of engaging with them and spending time with them, using that engagement and time to show them, slowly perhaps, but certainly surely, that there is a much better way to live.

In the Parable of the Lost Sheep, we should see Jesus Himself. The Shepherd does not just wait for the sheep to come back on their own. He also does not beat them back to the flock. Neither does He regard it as acceptable that they are lost. He goes after them actively, and gently leads them back. Jesus uses here an image deeply rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. This image of the Shepherd is found in too many places to list, from famous Psalm 23 to passages in Ezekiel. Some of these Old Testament passages depict God Himself as Israel's Shepherd, and others depict God's chosen Messiah as Israel's Shepherd. St. Gregory the Great, in his homily on this parable, pointed out that Jesus is the true Shepherd in both senses. Jesus is true God, and true Man, the Lord who is our Divine Shepherd, and the Davidic Messiah who is our human Shepherd. He laid all the lost sheep on His shoulders when He carried His Cross, accepting the burden of all of humanity's sins, piled up and stinking, from Adam and Eve to the Final Judgment.

The Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, "Lumen Gentium - Light of the Nations", uses this parable to describe the Church's mission in this world. The Church is not to wait for the Lord's lost sheep to wander back on their own. Nor is she to try and beat them into returning to the flock. Neither is she just to shrug her shoulders and say they are perfectly free to be lost. She is to seek them out, show them love, and gently lead them back. This does involve dialogue with them. Dialogue necessarily includes listening to what they have to say, but it also necessarily involves saying what the Church has to say, what God has given her to say. Germany's impressively learned Cardinal Walter Kasper recently lamented that too often modern Catholics try to engage in dialogue by saying as little as possible about Catholic teaching, what he called "The disappearance of the Catholic partner from the dialogue" As the Lord's Church, we have listening to do, but we also have some things to say, some vitally important things that the Lord Himself has commanded us to say. We aren't really seeking out the lost sheep, under the Good Shepherd, unless we say these things clearly.

In the parable of the lost coin, the woman has 10 drachmas, or denarii. The denarius was the Roman Empire's standard large silver coin, considered a standard day's wage for a manual laborer. It was not an insignificant coin. The woman spends time looking for the missing coin because it is worth looking for. The coin represents us, in our sins. The woman represents the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus looks for us because we are worth looking for. Made in the image and likeness of God, we have value. The Lord Jesus engaged in His saving work because we are worth saving. Sometimes our sins lead us into a sense of worthlessness. God's grace assisting us, that is to be resisted. We have been purchased, and at a price, a price the Divine

Purchaser deemed worth paying. Even in our sins we are precious in God's sight, well worth saving.

Now, on to the beautiful Parable of the Prodigal Son. certainly one of the most beautiful of all the Lord Jesus' parables. Of this parable Pope John Paul observes "Although the word 'mercy' does not appear, this parable nevertheless expresses the essence of Divine Mercy in a particularly clear way"

The first thing to note about the essence of Divine Mercy, as revealed in this parable, is that it has nothing to do with deserving. The younger son in this story is a scoundrel. The young man demands his share of his inheritance before his father's death. More than merely unusual, this is outrageously insulting. In effect, he says to his father "Old Man, I'm tired of waiting for you to die. Give me now what I've got coming to me". Beyond insulting his father, one would think unforgivably, the young man brings shame upon his father by his use of the inheritance in relentless partying. Part of Israel's wisdom was Proverbs 28:7, "He who keeps the law is a wise son, but a companion of gluttons shames his father" Then, as now, people too easily assume that a child's scandalous behavior indicates parental failure, an assumption that still creates shame in parents. The young man has publicly insulted and shamed his father. It is difficult, if not impossible to have sympathy for him. In no way does he deserve mercy.

Sin has consequences. When the foolish young man runs out of his father's money, he has to take work where he can get it. Sheer need forces him to work for a non-Jewish farmer. As a Gentile, this farmer raises pigs. Pigs were, and are, entirely unproblematic for Gentiles (I myself am delighted to be able to eat bacon), but Jews were, and are, bound by Leviticus 11:7. Swine are ritually unclean animals. The young man's fall is complete. He is dependent, poor, hungry, ritually disgraced, and, being employed by a Gentile, unable to observe the Sabbath day of rest and holiness even if, in a good moment, he wanted to. Sin very often has worldly consequences, such as broken relationships, lost jobs, public humiliation, or even imprisonment. Sin almost always has psychological consequences too. It produces anxiety. That is verifiable by experience. Sinners are much more worried about life, the universe, and everything than are the saints. Sin also produces cynicism and a sense of hopelessness. What is life about? For the sinner, the answer is ultimately nothing. Always, sin has spiritual consequences. The more one sins, the less one can resist further sin. For good reason does St. Paul, in Romans and Galatians, speak of sin as slavery. By sin, someone gradually makes himself Satan's slave.

Then, of course, things turn around. Out of what appears not to be a noble motive, sheer desperation, the young man turns back to his father for help. The Father embraces him. A literal translation would be "he fell upon his neck". The Father receives him back with enthusiasm, and even passion. There is nothing tepid about Divine Mercy. It is warm, even blazing. This is the fire of which the Lord Jesus said "I came to set the world on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing" In the flame of Divine Mercy sin, even the most outrageous sin, is utterly consumed. The son had rejected his place in the family, but the Father gives it back completely. Here are shoes for your feet (slaves would never have real shoes)! Here is a long

robe for feasting, not a short tunic for working! More remarkably, here is the ring of a son! The outrageous young man's restoration is complete.

Why does the Father act thus? Because that is the Father's nature. Mercy is Who He is. Clearly, the Father in the parable stands for God. "The Father's fidelity to Himself," writes Pope John Paul, "is expressed in a manner particularly charged with affection" The Father is true to His nature. God is Love, St. John tells us, and the hallmark of Love is Mercy. The Father is merciful because He is Who He is. This is not pity, but Mercy. The Father does not feel sorry for his foolish, wretched son. He loves him, and in love gives him Mercy without limit. God does not pity us, but has mercy on us. He does not feel sorry for us, in the messes we make, but loves us. He loves us sinners, and in His love gives us Mercy without limit. That is Who He is, as revealed in Jesus Christ. Mercy is Who He is.

Now, who are we?

Just as the Scribes and Pharisees were angry that Jesus of Nazareth ate with sinners, so the older brother in the parable is angry that his Father is giving the returned Prodigal a feast. What about Justice? What the older brother doesn't realize is that Justice and Mercy have kissed. The younger brother has experienced the consequences of his sins, and has returned to the Father. Justice has led to Mercy, and been perfected by Mercy. The Scribes and the Pharisees, likewise, did not realize that Jesus ate with sinners to accomplish the perfection of Justice, calling them back from sin and death - for the wages of sin is death - to holiness and life. Whoever among those sinners listened to Jesus met the Lamb pointed out by John the Baptist, the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world. Whoever among those sinners listened to Jesus rejected sin, and embraced Mercy in the Flesh. In the work of Jesus Christ, Justice was truly served, but was served by being perfected in Mercy.

The thing most to remember about the Divine Mercy, the last point of this homily, is that it restores what seemed to have been lost, but was never fully lost. Divine Mercy causes a return to what was always really there. As Pope John Paul writes, "The joy indicates a good that has remained intact: even if he is a prodigal, a son does not cease to be truly his Father's son; it also indicates a good that has been found again; which in the case of the Prodigal Son was his return to the truth about himself" Always, Divine Mercy restores the image of God in us that has been tarnished. Always, Divine Mercy reveals a preciousness in us that has been covered over, but never truly destroyed. Always, Divine Mercy opens our eyes and lips to enable us to recognize the Father, and to call out "Abba", as we realize who we really always have been, and receive the resolve and power to live as such.

