

LOST & FOUND

God saves us from our sins. He is our Saviour and we are the sinners. In the 1st Reading it is Moses who intercedes and by means of some enterprise bargaining obtains forgiveness for his sinful people. In the new covenant, Saint Paul reminds bishop Timothy that Jesus came into the world to save sinners. The Gospel from Saint Luke likewise centres on forgiveness. It is utterly unique for it alone contains the three Parables of Mercy: Lost Sheep, Lost Coin and Lost Son.

Ask yourself why Jesus wanted to tell more than one parable. Is one not enough? The three parables depict diverse ways that sinners are lost. Why was the sheep lost? Why was the coin lost? Why were the sons lost? Note the plural – for both sons are sinners.

Let's look at the first parable. A sheep is a fairly simple animal – let's be honest, they are just dumb. So too some people fall away from God and the commandments not because of bitterness or malice but just because they are foolish and stupid. And like the lost sheep they don't even know that they are lost. Perhaps for them they are just in the wrong place at the wrong time. They wander everywhere in life but never come home to God while the years fritter away. Then suddenly they are confronted with a stark reality – a wake-up call. Note that just as the good Shepherd never ceased looking for the lost sheep, so too God never gives up on us. It doesn't matter when He comes provided that we want to be found. Then heaven rejoices because Christ came to call sinners not the virtuous who have no need of conversion.

In the second parable about the lost coin we are not dealing with just a coin. The coin belonged to a set, a necklace of coins with holes through the centre that string together to provide a jewelled dowry for marriage, as was customary back then. Without the full set, all ten, one's future lay in jeopardy. So how did she lose one of the ten? The woman may have been playing with them or showing them to someone. Whatever the case, unlike the sheep that is dumb, the coin was lost through no fault of its own. It is the woman who was to blame for she was careless with the coin. So too in our world many souls are lost through the carelessness of others – through their fault. Perhaps people fall away on account of scandal or they have been abused or hurt by others in the Church. How many young people are morally lost and know not their way back to God because they were never taught by their parents or teachers about the commandments, sin and grace? How was the coin found? The woman searched thoroughly, we are told, she searched and searched until she found it. We need to keep up our efforts to encourage and instruct others in the ways of the faith. The Church, our mother never gives up on others, so we should never give up on encouraging others to convert to God.

The last parable, the Prodigal Son, is of course the most popular. The word prodigal refers to the prodigious manner of spending that causes the once wealthy son to become a pauper. It is a beautiful story of rebellion and forgiveness. Of course, the father represents God and the two sons depict the two ways we sin: one publicly and the other privately. Often upon an initial reading one feels sorry for the older son, who seems poorly done by when the younger brother returns seeking forgiveness. But the more one prays with *Lectio Divina* employing textual analysis and a variety of translations the more one realises that there is another layer of meaning hidden within.

Both sons reject the father, all sinners reject God. It is clear that the younger son rebels against the will of the father but where and when does the older son rebel? His sin, like the sins of many, remain hidden, personal and private, but nevertheless a sin that need forgiveness. Have we forgotten that two of the ten commandments deal with internal sins of desire in the heart? We know that the younger son wasted his money and fell into dire poverty that eventually led to his conversion. His vices are public while the older son is not praised for his virtues. So what are his vices? We all have them. We can ascertain from the text that this older son was alienated from his father for these four reasons. 1). He is not home when his brother arrives. Every sinner leaves the spiritual presence of God, though they may physically remain (think of Judas). We are not told that he is working hard or been successful but simply that he is away. 2). The older son has rejected his own and knows that he does not belong in their presence. Sinners are readily annoyed with any reference to God or virtue. This brother being estranged from the father's will desires not to be at home. That is why when knowing not the reason for the festivity, he summons a servant out of the home for an explanation. His language then denotes his internal disdain for the family since he uses not once the name of his father and brother – referring to him 'as this son of yours'. 3). Blame game. Sinners whose sins are hidden often deflect their guilt by pointing to another person's sins. When Adam was asked what had happened by God he blamed Eve and she blamed the serpent. The older brother endowed with a poor-me scenario accuses his father that *never* was he allowed to feast – is that so? Then he accuses his brother of his sins. How would he know what they are? Claiming that he had wasted the money with his prostitutes. Yet there is not mention of this immoral behaviour. 4). In spite of the father's entreaties this older son refuses to be in his presence. He refuses to seek forgiveness for the bitterness in his heart. In doing so, he remains outside and there the story tragically ends. Triumph for one son and tragedy for the other. God will not force Himself into our hearts. Remember the image of Christ knocking at a door with a lantern in his hand. The door is a symbol of our soul for he will knock, but we must open. Every sinner can be forgiven except that one who refuses to be forgiven. The ultimate tragedy for such a person is that they can never call Jesus their Saviour.