

Pentecost III

“I say unto you there shall be joy in heaven over one sinner who does repentance.”

Dearly beloved, two days ago Holy Church celebrated the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, symbol and source of divine love, the abyss of mercy from whence flows our salvation. This 3rd Sunday in Pentecost continues in the same vein by its insistence on the solicitude God has for those who are lost or fallen from grace. In today’s Gospel Jesus gives three parables concerning the common human experience of losing something and the comfort in its being found once again. He does this so sinners might know of God’s merciful love: that not only will they be welcomed back to His embrace, but that they will be *sought out by Him*, and that heaven itself will rejoice once they have been found.

In Luke’s account we hear of Jesus’ preaching to the crowd, including publicans – much hated because they were tax collectors, an office purchased from the Romans and usually a means of extortion. The crowd was made up, too, of ordinary people, “sinners” in the eyes of the Pharisees, because they did not observe a meticulous scrupulosity regarding the minutia of the Law. The Pharisees were there to condemn Jesus because of His easy association with people they felt were despised by God – ignoring Ezekiel who said, “God does not wish the death of a sinner, but that he be converted and live.”

To these people who generally lived a pastoral existence Jesus spoke using images familiar to them. And so He said that a certain man had a hundred sheep – a number which represents spiritual perfection and a physical reality representing something of considerable value. One was lost – and so was the perfection of the fold. So the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine and searches for it diligently among the hills and ravines of the Judean pastureland. Once found he lifts it – full grown, heavy, dirty – onto his shoulders and carries it home to the flock, now rendered perfect by its return. The shepherd then rejoices with his neighbors who have heard and sympathized with the loss. “Thus, I say to you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine who need no penance.”

The mercy of God, symbolized by Christ’s own Heart of love, is that Good Shepherd: Jesus explains His parable: He, as God, has come to seek the lost. In a certain sense, those who are on the path to salvation are left in the care of His Church. But we are each called, in our different ways, to be His disciples and seek out those who have fallen or drifted away from grace – and those who have never known it in the first place. God *desires* the lost – it is the root cause of His Incarnation – and so He searches them out. When they are found, like the lost sheep, or a mother’s lost child, there is true rejoicing.

They are drawn into the perfection of grace and the fold of the elect, and cause for rejoicing among the choirs in glory.

In the parable it seems the ninety-nine come off rather badly in Jesus' explanation. But the point of His teaching was to expose the hypocrisy of the Pharisees: the truth of religion being that God loves sinners as the shepherd who loves his sheep. Good or bad, God has no need of men. Rather, it is the profound love of God, symbolized in the Sacred Heart of Jesus, that motivates Him to a special care for those in particular need, and that heaven itself rejoices when a stray has been returned to the life of grace and the path of salvation.

In the 2nd parable Jesus speaks of a woman who has lost a coin of particular value: carefully lighting her house, she searches thoroughly until it is found. Like the shepherd, she rejoices with her friends since it is the nature of goodness to share itself with others.

In both these parables the conclusion is the same: heaven rejoices – God, the angels and saints are *pleased* when that which was lost is found, when that which was dead, is now made unto new life again. In these parables – and the one concerning the prodigal son which follows in the Gospel text – the shepherd, the woman, the forgiving father, all represent God and the infinite depth of love, mercy and forgiveness which characterizes His search for our souls; the infinite love which the very Heart of God bears towards each one of us.

Most beloved children of God, the Lord Jesus has come into this world for one purpose only: to lead us to the safe harbor of Himself in heaven. *None* of us is without sin. All are subject to falling from grace and perdition. But Christ seeks out and desires especially those who have abandoned Him. We might wonder indeed whom does God love more: the sinner, who must be restored to the supernatural order (a greater feat than the creation of all things from nothing says St. Augustine), or the saint who has never fallen from the state of grace? The only realistic answer to this question is that God loves him most to whom He gives the most grace! And this is the lesson we should take from today's liturgy. We need to be faithful to grace, and humbly penitent knowing how easily we slip from the love of God into the preference of self and the myriad forms of self deception by which we mislead ourselves into ways which are erroneous.

Grace is God's love operative in the soul. In the month of June, a month of devotion to the Sacred Heart, Catholics have prayed, "Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make our hearts like unto thine." In this spirit of reparation and humility let us continue to ask God for an ever deepening love of Him, and others for the love of God. Let us, by word and action, prove ourselves imitators of Christ and doers of His word. This, by seeking not only to bring others to the flock of the Divine Shepherd, but to be ourselves grateful recipients of that love which has so often brought us home upon the strength of

His divine shoulders. Then, in our acts of reparation and adoration, we will have a foretaste of the glory of heaven – where God not only rejoices in the redemption of His creatures, but where we will be ravished forever by our vision of the Divine Heart of Love Itself.