**24th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C**

**11th September 2022**

**First Reading Exodus 32:7-11, & 13-14**

While Moses is conversing with Yahweh on the mountain, the people conspire with Aaron to make gods that they can see for themselves. God informs Moses of what the people have done. 'Your' people he calls them as if they no longer belonged to him, and in v. 10 there is a hint that he can make himself another people.

The ancient Jewish attitude to Yahweh embraced two opposing mindsets. On the one hand there was a respect for him amounting to terror. Seeing or hearing him at first hand could be fatal. At the same time prayer to him was forthright to the point of rudeness.

Here (v. 11) Moses questions the wisdom of God in turning against his people. He reminds God, firmly, of his promise to the patriarchs (v. 13). Surely God is not going to welch on his promise!

The Missal omits the next sentence, which contains a hint of blackmail: 'Why should the Egyptians say... 'God will make himself a laughing-stock if he permits his people to perish. Not much of a god he is, the nations will say, if he is unable to protect his own. Therefore, 'turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people' (v. 12). So the Lord relented.

But the really significant feature of the text is Moses' action as a mediator. He pleads for the Israelites by reminding God of his promise to the patriarchs. It is the same motivation that prompts Jesus, on the cross, to pray: "Father, forgive them."

This intercessory prayer, I have always found illogical. I assume that God knows, long before we do, of our needs, weaknesses and obstinacy. How is it possible for some third party to change his attitude towards us? Can he be persuaded to act towards us in a more generous way than he would have done if our mediator had not badgered him? And how does he treat those who have not had such advocates?

I have never found a satisfactory answer to this, except to say that, inexplicably, it works in practice.

**Second Reading 1 Timothy 1:12-17**

The two letters to Timothy and the letter to Titus have, since the eighteenth century, been known as the Pastoral Epistles because they are concerned with pastoral care for the Church members. They differ from Paul’s earlier letters because they reflect a later situation. (It is possible that they were written by Paul’s successor in his name, perhaps after his martyrdom).

The earlier anticipation of the return of the Lord has given way to an acceptance that the Church is here for a longer stay. This understanding has driven the Church to consider its structure and its orthodoxy. Natural too, is a concern with 'good citizenship'. Christians are expected to be model exponents of the moral and social virtues. In this way it was hoped that they would win respect and acceptance among their contemporaries in the Roman world. This attitude seems to presume a date before 64 AD when Christians began to be used as scapegoats to divert attention from public failings.

By the later time the Revelation of Saint John, this pacific approach had been abandoned for one of open warfare.

Even if it is the work of a disciple, our reading gives an account of Paul’s conversion and is thoroughly impregnated with the thinking of the Apostle. It speaks of the understanding of the atonement that Paul acquired in the miracle of his apostolic call. He had experienced the mercy of God and had received the call to God's service even though he had opposed and injured the infant Church. That fact served to highlight the quality of God's generosity and underlies our duty to thank and honour him.

**Gospel Luke 15:1-32**

This long reading comprises three stories. The short alternative contains the first two, the long version includes the third. The three would have been originally been uttered on different occasions, and therefore to different audiences, but have been assembled here by Luke because they all deal with lost things. Those present comprise the least important elements in society together with the most influential who prompt Jesus’ teaching.

The Lost Sheep (vv. 4-7).

Jesus tells of the shepherd who went in search of the sheep that was lost and of his joy when he had found the stray. The solicitude of the man is such that he leaves the ninety-nine in the desert, that is, in the scanty pasture of the Judean hill-country, while he searches for the one. And his joy at finding the lost sheep is so great that he must tell his neighbours of it. The story contains a characteristic Aramaic idiom that suggests a close connection with the original words of Jesus.

The moral of the story is stated in emphatic terms: God will rejoice that, together with the just, he can also welcome home the repentant sinner. The ninety-nine are described as ‘virtuous who have no need of repentance’ This does not mean sinless, but relatively sinless as we used to distinguish between venial and mortal sins.

The Lost Coin (vv. 8-10).

The second story has a similar point, but is unique to Luke. It is typical of him that he has brought a woman into the story. The 'silver coins' (or 'drachmas') represent a modest sum but the loss of even one coin is of great concern to a woman in humble circumstances. She had to light a lamp because the small windowless house - the only opening being a low door – would be in near darkness.

Again we have a typically Jewish phrase 'before the angels of God' (v. 10) This is a conventional way of avoiding the mention of the divine name directly. (see above and 12:8-9).

Both stories consider the conversion of a sinner from God's point of view: he rejoices that the lost should return home, because they are his; he rejoices because he can forgive. God has sent his Son 'to seek out and to save the lost' (19:10), and Jesus' actual concern for sinners is a concrete proof that God does more than desire that sinners should repent.

The lost son

Luke then gives the much longer and more complicated story of the lost son. This has already been used on the fourth Sunday of Lent and as it stands was commented on at the time. But when it is preceded by the two shorter stories, it is seen in a different light.

When it is read in isolation, the emphasis is on the prodigal son's initiative in returning home. It suggests that our reconciliation with God lies in our own hands. But, when it is read in the light of the earlier ones the phrase ‘when he came to his senses’ suggests a divine initiative.

Then all three parables emphasize the prevenient action of God in seeking and saving the lost. This thought is then carried over into the anticipation of the father in the third parable: while the returning prodigal was still at a distance, his father "ran" and welcomed him home.

Two points must be made to correct common misconceptions of the story. One is simply that it is not a story of ‘the lost son’ but of ‘the lost sons’ for neither understood the father until one was enlightened. The elder one was not so blessed by the end of the tale.

The second point commonly unappreciated, is that the younger son was extremely lost. Lost to the greatest extent than any human being has ever known and far worse than most of us. Our pattern is not the younger, but the older son who has never really left home. But the challenge to him is still on the table by the end of the story.

Thus understood, all three parables are linked with the atonement, which, as we have seen, runs like a thread through all the readings of the day. While the earlier readings employed the Christ-to-God aspect of the atonement, the gospel balances this aspect with the movement of God through Christ to humanity.

The atonement is not the human act of the Son appeasing an angry Deity, but God's gift to his people, in which he undertakes to do for them what they could not do for themselves. Christ is the presence of God in human form for our sake, seeking and saving the lost.