

THE EMMAUS SERIES

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Exodus 32: 7-11; 13-14

1 Timothy 1: 12-17

Luke 15: 1-32

This son of mine has come back to life; he was lost and is found

The generous attitude of Jesus to 'tax collectors and sinners' scandalised those who saw themselves as the guardians of Israel's true traditions. Luke gives us three parables with which Jesus responded directly to this criticism – he was, he said, giving expression to the merciful ways of his Father. The best know of the three, of course, is the story of the son who, after foolishly squandering his inheritance, is received back by his rejoicing father.

When we recognise how this elaborate story fits into the message that was central to Jesus teaching, we understand that it conveys far more than the brief parables before it. The story hinges on the relationship between the lost son and his father. The real shortcoming of the son, as the story shows, was not his prodigality, but the fact that, though he has lived with his father all his years, he had not had the generosity of spirit that would bring him to understand the love his father had for him. Even when he comes to his senses, his attitude is that of a mercenary – though he has lost the rights of a son, his father is a good man, he will give him a place among his slaves. Jesus saw his immediate mission as calling the nation to identify with the ways of the God of the covenant. Their situation is like that of the prodigal; they have lived for centuries in covenant with God; and they have found themselves in exile for their infidelities; but even after their return they are far from appreciating the ways of the God of the covenant, and the loving designs God has for them. The elder brother in the story - whose relationship to his father, and his claim on his father, is established by his 'obeying the orders' he has received – also has the outlook of a mercenary. It is clear that he stands for the leaders who should have led God's people to an understanding of God's loving and generous ways, but have persuaded themselves that they show their faithfulness to the covenant by an exact observance of the requirements of the Law. Jesus is calling God's people to learn at last the clear message of the covenant experience, the loving, merciful and inclusive ways in the heart of his Father.

The words of the father in the story, to the sulking elder brother, are filled with the pathos of Jesus' appeal: 'My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours'. The 'best robe', the 'ring', the 'sandals' and the 'feast', all marks of special regard, point to a mercy and generosity that have no limits. We are left to imagine the aftermath. Surely, the son's life is transformed, as he comes, at last, to share in the love in the heart of his father. The future the Saviour promises to the world, in fact, will be a sharing in the love of his Father (cf. John 14:25 etc).

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