

**THERE WILL BE JOY IN HEAVEN OVER ONE SINNER WHO REPENTS – Biblical commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM**

**Lk 15.1-32**

*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'*

*Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them.*

*Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"*

*And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this*

***my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in.***

***His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.***

*"You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy"* (Lev.19,1) And this is the vital phrase that runs through the books of the Old Testament. Well, this invitation to holiness is never heard, strangely enough, in the words of Jesus. Jesus has never invited men to holiness. Why?

Holiness understood as observing the rules, the laws, the precepts that, if put into practice eventually distances one from the rest of the crowd, isn't part of Jesus' invitation. Jesus substitutes "holiness" with "compassion". Holiness separates one from the crowd, compassion brings us nearer to one another.

The people, through holiness, through hoarding prayers, devotions, think to rise to reach the Lord. But on the other hand, the Lord came down to be amongst the people, so the pious and religious ones, rise to reach the Lord, but they never meet him because he has come down amongst the people.

From here is the incompatibility and then the hostility, between the religious world, the religious people, and Jesus. It is that that teaches us this beautiful passage, chapter 15 in Luke's Gospel, this Sunday. The evangelist writes, *"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him."* Jesus had just laid down the three radical conditions to follow, to be free of affects, family ties, of one's reputation and free from possessing property and so take up the cross.

Therefore they are conditions quite severe, hard, and they were the conclusion of his teaching with the words *"he who has ears to hear, let him hear"*. Those that have ears for hearing felt attracted by this message even if very demanding, very severe, they are the refuse of society: the publicans, the tax collectors, that were irreparably impure and sinners. Sinners in general, meaning all those who would not or could not observe all the requirements of the law.

Well then, we should be glad that finally these people that were always emarginated, excluded and no doubt lived in delusion and sin, turned to Jesus. No! The religious people were not happy with this. The fervor of their doctrine, the zeal with which they defended the laws was a beam thrust into their eyes that obstructed them from seeing clearly, with love and compassion.

In fact here is the reaction, “*the Pharisees*” pious laymen that put into practice all the regulations of the law, “*and the scribes*”, zealous guardians of the orthodoxy, “grumbled “ – they did not agree, grumbling- “*«This man ...»*” these pious persons, are continually in the Gospels, they always speak to Jesus with an expression full of hatred and contempt, never by name, they always avoid to call Him Jesus. This man that “*«... receives sinners and eats with them»*”.

These are two intolerable crimes. The sinners are not welcomed, they must be avoided, they are not welcome but must be threatened. And Jesus, not only welcomes them, He eats with them. Eating with an impure person means they her impurity is transmitted to others. The religious people have not yet understood that with Jesus the time when sinners had to purify themselves before being welcomed to the Lord is finished, now the time has begun when the welcome of the Lord purifies. But this they do not understand.

Well then, to them – it is not told to the group of disciples – Jesus tells a parable that is in three parts, the first is that of the shepherd that loses a sheep on the mountain and he leaves the other ninety-nine to search for the lost one and, says the evangelist “*Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep.....*” and the characteristic of all this passage is joy, this expression shall be repeated “joy” and also “rejoice”.

What the Pharisees and scribes have never understood is that God, other than being worried with being obedient and respectful, he was occupied for the happiness of the human beings. It is this that the Lord has at heart. Therefore, “*...he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.*” The lost sheep is the sinner that had gone astray. Well, when the shepherd finds it, he did not shout or kick it, but put it on his shoulder, that is, he gives strength to one that had none.

And then he calls all his friends to celebrate with him. The same is with the parable of the lost money, this also communicates the same expression with the invitation to joy. And last, the third, the most distinct, when it speaks of that wicked son that returns to his father not because he misses his father, but he misses food: not for remorse, but for a morsel to eat.

Well he returns and does not find a judge, but finds a maternal figure, full of love. It is the father, next the evangelist adds, the dress, the ring and the sandals, he wants to give to his son more authority than he had before, a dignity that he never knew and a great freedom.

Because this is God, God communicates love and he communicates it in an absolute manner. The God of Jesus is not good, he is exclusively good.

Well, what is the reaction to all this? Jesus tells us at the end of this parable where the elder son appears from the fields. He returns home, hears the rejoicing in the mourning house, he should have rushed in, in his father’s house where there are only seriousness and sadness. He does not understand what joy and happiness are.

He does not want to enter, and sends a servant to ask. The servant tells him that his brother has returned. While the father, an expression of love of God, rejoices, this elder brother, image of scribes and Pharisees, becomes angry. Here, as we said before, it is the zeal for the doctrine that blinds the person and obstructs them from seeing situations and events with open eyes, that of charity.

Jesus ridicules the behavior of this son and he makes a parody of how religion can make people infantile. And here is how the eldest son whimpered, “*«Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat»*”.

It is the imagine of the person that serves God, not to have the reaction of the son with the father, but that of a servant. And for this obedience to his father, he is not similar in his behavior. The God of Jesus does not ask for obedience, but asks likeness to his love.

And for this he expects compensation, he does not collaborate with the father's action. Therefore it is a very vicious caricature that Jesus makes of religious people that remain in an infantile condition. And for this they are hard and jealous of the freedom that the Lord concedes to all that welcome him.