

THIS YOUR BROTHER WAS DEAD, AND NOW IS ALIVE– Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Luke 15,1-3.11-32

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: 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.”

That which the Pharisees and scribes, representatives of the religious institution never understood that God, instead of being concerned with obedience and respect, is preoccupied with the happiness of the humankind. So, if the scribes and Pharisees do not change they will never know the happiness of the Father.

It is what the evangelist Luke tells us in chapter 15, with which is without doubt the most known and loved parable. That of the prodigal son. Let's see.

Luke writes, “ *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near.* ” The evangelist is precise, all. Therefore all those that live in sin have felt in Jesus something different. No more threats, no more punishments, but love offered also for them. Not only love, but also respect.

“*...all drawing near to hear him.*” Well, the reaction of the religious authorities is as always: “*..the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man...* ” Take note that in the gospels the heads of religion, the religious authorities, the spiritual elite, always avoid pronouncing Jesus' name, referring to him as ‘that man’, with the utmost contempt.

“*This man receives sinners and eats with them.*” Not only does he receive them, but eats with them; eating together means sharing life. And then Jesus says something to them, but this parable is not for Jesus' disciples, but for the religious authorities – the scribes and Pharisees.

“*So he told them this parable:*” (that well known one of the prodigal son, and we will deal with only the essential parts because it is rather long and there is not time to comment all of it): a man had two sons, the youngest asked for his part of the inheritance. It is important for the understanding of this verse that the father “*..divided his property between them.*”

Therefore he gave that which was due to the youngest son, the double –according to the Jewish legislation –to the eldest son. This youngest son went away, “*..took a journey into a far country,*” a Gentile country and he proves incapable, in fact in a short time “*..he squandered his property in reckless living.*”

Then he fell in misfortune , because a great famine arrived. He who has staked everything on the money, when he had no more money, he found himself to be nothing. He who was the owner of his house, finds himself under a master. From a master to servant.

The evangelist specifies that, “*... he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.* We know that pigs are an impure animal. So it's the ultimate degradation. Well at this point, suffering hunger – they gave him nothing to eat – this son says: “*How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread,..*” so he sees that this father was not only generous with his sons, but also with his workers, “*.. but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him,....* ”

Attention, to understand well this verse, sometimes this son is presented as a model of conversion, of repentance. Nothing like this. This is a boy that reasons always for his own interests, and based on money. What he lacks is not the father, but bread. It is not remorse that now causes him to return to his father, but hunger. Therefore there is no pain that has brought him to the family

'Father, I have sinned against heaven..' (therefore God) '..and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' So his rights are no longer of value; he cannot be treated as a son because he has already received his part, *"Treat me as one of your hired servants."*

He does not know what the relationship of a son with his father, and asks to be treated as a servant. *"And he arose and came to his father."* I repeat that he does not go because of repentance, but for interest. He does not miss his father, but he misses the bread.

The figure on which the evangelist now centres our attention is that of the father, God's image. *" But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him.."* The father had respected the desire of the son but he has not forgotten him, he awaited him

"...and felt compassion," Having compassion is a divine action with which returns life to whom has not a life. It is the third time that this appears in Luke's gospel. The first is the episode of the widow of Nain. When Jesus had compassion and revived the son, the second with the Samaritan, the man that had compassion for the wounded and restored life.

So the father's reaction is not resentful, angry or offensive but a desire to reconstruct life

"..and ran (to him)" This is inconceivable in Middle Eastern culture. To run is always a sign of dishonour, and never an elderly person or a parent runs to meet a son, but for the father the desire to honour the son is more important than his own honour.

"..and embraced him" When reading the gospel put yourselves in the shoes of the first listeners that did not know how the story ended. We would have imagined that, after embracing him he would have throttled him! This idiot who has squandered everything and was reduced to being a swineherd.

And here is another surprise: *"..and kissed him."* The evangelist here refers to the first great pardon in the Bible, when Esau pardoned his brother Jacob that had stolen the inheritance. When Esau met with Jacob he kisses him. The kiss is a sign of pardon. So the father, God's image, pardons the son before he can ask to be pardoned The son has no trust and attacks with his "Act of Contrition"..... *"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,.." A robe was an honour which gave dignity to a person. This boy. This son that had lost his dignity, now returns in the splendour of his dignity. But that which follows is more surprising.

"..put a ring on his hand, The ring is not a decoration, an ornament. But the ring was the seal that held the house administrator. Therefore the father to this incompetent son, that had squandered all his

inheritance, restores dignity and trust greater than what he had enjoyed. He put into his hands the administration of the house, without knowing what this son will do with it.

“..and shoes on his feet.” Remember that this boy had asked to be treated as one of the servants and the father said : “ No, put sandals on your feet”. The owners of the house wore sandals, the servants when barefooted.

And then said: *“... let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”* And here enters the person to whom the parable is addressed.

“... his older son..” – imagine the scribes and Pharisees, that do not want to enter into the house, protest. The father goes out to meet him, and he laments. It can be seen a Jesus that criticizes the childishness in which the religion keeps its followers. And says: *“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.”* Remember at the beginning the father had divided the inheritance between the two sons and the oldest son had been given twice as much as the younger son.

Therefore it was all his, why had he not taken it ? It is the religion. The religion keeps the people in an infantile state, they have no relationship of love with God, but a relationship of obedience, service and they wait for a reward. But most of all they wait the authorization for rejoicing or not.

So, as the father went to meet the son that was lost, he goes to meet this son that does not want to enter into the house, in his lament he had said *“...”, this son of yours..* “ the father reminds him that he is his brother.

“And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” Only he has lived in the condition of servitude and not a son and had not been able to enjoy himself.

“It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother...” Here he had said “your son” the father reminds him “your brother”..... *“ was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”* So Jesus invites these scribes and Pharisees to rejoice that these sinners are near him, the unbelievers, but unfortunately we know from reading the gospel that the scribes and Pharisees, blinded by the “log”(Matthew 7,3) of their righteousness, of their faithfulness to the laws, will never understand God’s mercy.