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THE MERCY PARABLES

Main pages commented on:

- Lk 10:25-37 (Parable of the Samaritan);
- Lk 15:11-32 (Parable of the Merciful Father: "Prodigal Son")
- Jn. 13:34-35 (New Commandment)
- Lk 15:1-3 (Jesus receives sinners)
- Mt 25:14-30 (Parable of the Talents)

**Meetings of 12-13 December 2007: Casamicciola Terme (Na)
Salone delle Terme Badu – Piazza Bagni**

Foreword: This transcription of the two meetings held by fr Alberto, has not been revised by the author. Therefore, we ask the reader to take this into account and try to understand the message that is conveyed notwithstanding the form and the manner in which it is conveyed.

A transcript also cannot convey the speaker's tone of voice, gestures and facial expressions, meaning that some expressions can easily be misunderstood by the person who writes the text.

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1st Meeting: Wednesday, December 12, 2007

The theme that we are going to discuss is "**The Parables of Mercy**". These are the Parables with which Jesus makes us understand the real nature of God. We often fail to understand the novelty brought by Jesus with regard to the relationship between men and God.

In the history of religions, man has always tried to reach God. A God who was the projection of man's fears, ambitions, frustrations, made God a distant and inaccessible entity. Man, in order to reach this God, had to separate himself from other people through participation in continuous prayers, rites and a different lifestyle; man, in other words, had to rise above others to reach God who was believed to be higher up.

With Jesus, God makes himself man, fully man; with Jesus, God takes the appearances and identity of a deeply human person. This changes the relationship between man and God. If, in the first instance, man was supposed to climb up to his God, with Jesus man can fully meet God only by becoming deeply human. Therefore man must no longer separate himself from others to reach the divinity, but the more a man becomes human, the more he discovers the divine in him.

Then you can see that this is accessible to all. In religion, reaching God was reserved for a select few, for those who could afford a life of prayers, a particular style of Holiness or raising themselves to ascetic heights. With Jesus, the opportunity to meet God is available to everyone. How do you meet God? By becoming deeply human. The God of Jesus is a God who is deeply human, and only those who are deeply human, regardless of their religious beliefs, or conduct, will meet him.

The first of the two parables that we will examine during these days is the parable of the Samaritan that the evangelist Luke offers us in the tenth chapter. It is a very important parable that, if understood properly, will change not only man's relationship with God, but also the relationship of men with their brothers.

When we read a passage of the Gospel we must place it in its context, i.e. always place it where the Evangelist has placed it, because only in this way we will be able to understand it. If we examine the tenth chapter of Luke's Gospel we see what its context is.

Jesus had invited the twelve disciples, a number representing Israel, to announce the Kingdom of God. It resulted in a total fiasco. Jesus had nurtured these disciples, had continuously given them refresher courses, but when he sent them to proclaim the Kingdom of God it was a total fiasco. Why? Because in their heads they were not thinking about the Kingdom of God, but about the Kingdom of Israel. The Evangelist wants to make us understand that when a person is dominated by ambition, a desire to rule over other people, he is reluctant to accept Jesus' message.

Jesus sent them to proclaim the Kingdom of God. What is the meaning of "Kingdom of God"? Kingdom of God is that environment where the love of God spreads worldwide, is not confined to one nation or one people, but wants to reach all people. Unfortunately, the twelve disciples didn't understand all this. Feelings of ambition and power had blocked them at the Kingdom of Israel and had prevented their understanding to develop.

In Luke's book, The Acts of the Apostles, there is an episode that is tragicomic: Jesus had died, had

risen and had taken the twelve disciples for a forty day course during which he spoke to them on a single theme. Says the Evangelist: he talked about the Kingdom of God. At the end of it one of the disciples asks: *'Lord, has the time come for you to restore the kingdom to Israel?'* (Ac 1:6). This is what they had in their heads.

Jesus sent these twelve disciples to proclaim the Kingdom of God. The failure was total: they hadn't understood yet that, according to Jesus, God was at the service of men, while they expected him to be served by men. Not only that, but they wanted to prevent, in their arrogance, people outside their group to spread the message of liberation. In fact, they said to Jesus: *'We saw someone driving out devils in your name, and because he is not with us we tried to stop him.'* (Lk 9:49-50). It is the arrogance of a group of people who think they have exclusive rights over Jesus. Others were casting out demons; they couldn't. Although Jesus had given them that power, they were unsuccessful. Why? Because they themselves were possessed by the demon of ambition, supremacy and domination. How can I free a person from a demon if I'm not free? They could not free people, but they were trying to hamper others who were successful.

Having seen how the Twelve failed, Jesus tries again; but no longer with the Twelve. Numbers in the Gospels do not have an arithmetic meaning: they are always used figuratively. The number twelve represents Israel, the twelve tribes. Jesus tries again; this time no longer with the Twelve, but with seventy two disciples instead (see Lk 10:1-20). What does the number Seventy two mean? The peoples of the earth, according to the calculation that is found in the book of Genesis, were composed of seventy two nations (see Gn 10).

Therefore, this seventy-two means that these disciples do not come from Israel, but from the pagan environment. As they are not tied to the idea of Israel's supremacy and dominance they succeed in their mission. In fact, they come back filled with joy and say to Jesus: *'Lord, even the devils submit to us when we use your name'* (Lk 10:17). And to this regard Jesus exclaims: *'I watched Satan fall like lightning from heaven'* (Lk 10:18). This expression of Jesus is very important because he declared his decisive victory over Satan; Satan is finally overcome. For a correct understanding of this character, we must look at it from the culture of the time.

Who was Satan in those days? It wasn't the devil as Christians envisaged afterwards. "Satan" was a civil servant of God, one of the characters at God's Court: he had the important role of inspector. Satan was travelling between heaven, where God was, and the Earth to check on people; and when he saw someone misbehaving, he would go back to God to report about that person's behaviour and ask to be allowed to condemn and punish. This was the role of Satan. Satan was people's accuser.

Now let's try and understand why Jesus says: *'I watched Satan fall like lightning from heaven'* (Lk 10:18). Jesus uses this expression because his God is a completely different God and infinitely distant from the God of religions created by men. The Evangelist Luke presents this as Jesus' main characteristic.

In every religion, God rewards those who observe his laws and punishes the wicked. In reality, it is not God, but the priests who ascribe this role to God to secure obedience to themselves. A king, in order to enforce his will, manifested in his laws, has a very effective means: he has soldiers or policemen who are on the lookout for infringements, he has an army, he has weapons. Therefore, those who do not obey will be at the receiving end of something unpleasant in the form of fines,

jail, or worse. But the priests, the priestly caste, what other tools do they have at their disposal to make people obey, if not that of a fearsome God? That is why the gods of religions put fear in people, and this allows priests to impose their will and smuggle it as God's. This is because if a priest says that this is his idea, you can answer: "So what! It's your idea, and it is worth as much as mine". But if he tells you that this is God's will then you will try to abide by it even if you find it difficult. The alternative is risking to get hurt. As a result, you are afraid of transgressing these laws.

Human laws, about which Jesus will say: '*Your tradition which you have handed down*' (Mk 7:13), were peddled as God's will. Priests promised a recompense for those who abided by them, but above all, they threatened those who didn't with awful punishments.

Therefore in all religions, God rewards the good and punishes the wicked. This is the power of religion. It is the weapon used to dominate and subdue people. "If you don't behave, terrible things will happen to you, which are the inevitable divine punishments. These are tremendous because they are eternal". A human punishment ends with your life, but God's punishment is terrible because it lasts for all eternity.

Understandably, people were very afraid of transgressing these rules. Jesus gets the results he wanted by sending the seventy two to proclaim his message because they were free from this ideology. This also involved the ambitious supremacy of Israel: Satan, the accuser, falls from the sky because his role as accuser with the Father is now completely superseded.

We said that Satan was spying on people on earth and then referred to God saying: "That one has done such and such thing: can I punish him?" And God would have given him permission. But Jesus' Father is a God-love, that has no other way of dealing with people than that of a continuous offer of love. This Father does not reward the good and punish the wicked, but offers his love to everyone, regardless of their attitude and behaviour.

Therefore, the poor Satan is unemployed! There is no point in going to God and telling him: "That person has misbehaved. Do you wish to punish him?" No! God does not punish! If God no longer rewards the good and punishes the wicked, the role of Satan, the accuser, is finished. That's why Jesus said he saw the Satan falling from the sky, like a thunderbolt. And it is at this time that the Evangelist writes: '*Just at this time, filled with joy by the Holy Spirit, he said, 'I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to little children. Yes, Father, for that is what it has pleased you to do'*' (Lk 10:21).

Jesus seeing these results, i.e. Satan falling from the sky to never return there, because his role as accuser with the kind of God that Jesus presented has become redundant, rejoices and says, "Thank you Lord because the little ones understood this, the wise and the learned, i.e. the priestly caste, did not understand and never will".

What did the little ones, that were represented by the seventy two disciples, that went out and proclaimed the Kingdom of God, understand? They understood a profound truth that is exclusive of the message of Jesus: God does not exclude anyone. It is religion that has invented sin to inculcate the sense of guilt in people and then dominate over them. It is religion that excludes people from God because it is religion that needs, for his own survival, to divide deserving from undeserving, righteous from wrong-doers, saints from sinners, pure from impure. It is religion that says to

people: "You, for your own behaviour, cannot approach the Lord. You, for your situation, you cannot even pray".

Jesus' message wipes out all of this. God is love and he extends his love to all creatures; no-one may feel excluded. Peter, after his shocking encounter with a pagan Centurion Cornelius, has a beautiful expression that we should always remember. Peter witnessed that the same Holy Spirit that had fallen on him and on the other disciples had also descended on a pagan. Pagans were considered people who were furthest from God. Peter was shocked. But how is it possible that the Spirit of God could descend on a pagan, a person considered impure, a person who was thought to be excluded from the love of God. Furthermore, this Spirit did not come down on this pagan after he had converted or after promising to change his behaviour. He descended upon him freely. Peter then shocked by this experience utters these words: *'God has made it clear to me that I must not call anyone profane or unclean'* (Ac 10:28).

This is a bomb: religion derives its strength from the division between pure and impure people. God has shown Peter that this was false. God had shown him that not a single person, for his/her behaviour or otherwise, can be regarded as impure, i.e. as excluded from God's love. This is the end of religion. If God's love is for everyone, no matter what, then you cannot put any fear on people with threats of punishment, possibly eternal. Where will all end then? Peter says: *'God has made it clear to me that I must not call anyone profane or unclean'*.

Then the God who despises people, the God who excludes certain people is not the true God, but a falsehood invented by the priestly caste to enhance its prestige and domination over people. It is the priestly caste in power that, having failed to offer convincing proposals, needs to compel people to abide by its laws through threats and fear.

What is the difference between Jesus' message and the Law? Jesus' message is an invitation to accept a proposal that fills people's lives, something good. When someone announces something good he does not need to threaten. If you know that I am a good cook and I invite you to dinner, I do not need to threaten you: all I need to do is to invite you and you would come because you know my food is good. On the other hand, if you know that as a cook I am a disaster and that every time you come to dinner you end up with a tummy ache, then I have to force you to come, otherwise you definitely would not come. In a nutshell, this is the difference between religion and Jesus' message.

Jesus' message is an offer of fullness of life and people do not need to be compelled to accept it. The Law is different: the Law imposes rules that often are contrary to logic and/or reason, impossible to understand at a rational level, and, therefore, they need to be imposed with threats and punishments.

Jesus thanks the Lord that the little ones have understood this profound truth, i.e. that there is not a single person who, for his behaviour, can be excluded from the love of God. By contrast, the doctors of the Law, the scholars, did not understand this.

While Jesus is explaining this, an incident happened. He is interrupted by one of these scholars who did not accept what Jesus was saying.

Let us begin reading this Parable: Luke, chapter 10 verses 25 onward: ***And Now ...***, (lit.: And

behold ...) the Evangelists often use this formula when they want to draw the attention of listeners on something important. **And now a lawyer ...** Who are these lawyers? Often they are also referred to as “scribes” or “doctors of the Law”.

These are lay people who devoted all their lives to the study of Sacred Scripture. At the ripe old age of 40, (life expectancy at the time was about 40 years) they received, through the laying on of hands, the same spirit of Moses. From then on, they are part of the infallible Teaching Institution of the Jewish establishment. Their word had the same authority as the word of God. So they were people who were considered very important in their society, they carried great prestige and their role was more important than that of the king or of the high priest. The deliberations of the scribes and doctors of the law carried the same weight as the word of God. **And now a lawyer stood up and, to test him, ...** Here already the Evangelist helps us to understand which direction this episode takes. The word “test” appears in this Gospel only twice: here and in the episode of Jesus' temptations in the desert, when it was the devil who “tested” him. Through this literary technique, well-known at the time, of linking two episodes by using the same word in both, the Evangelist makes us understand that those who were tasked with the duty of making God's will known to the people of Israel were in fact devils. Those who presented themselves as doctors of the Law were nothing other than tools of the devil. With their display of knowledge they did not intend to honour God, but only themselves.

So **A lawyer stood up and, to test him, asked, 'Master, ...'** He displays the same sly way of speaking as the devil's by addressing Jesus as “Master”. He was hypocritical. “Master” is someone who teaches. The lawyer, by calling Jesus “Master”, implied he wanted to learn. The reality was that he asked Jesus a question not because he wanted to learn but to test him. He wanted to see if Jesus' doctrine was in line with their orthodox teaching. These lawyers were always alert, always vigilant because as soon as they came to hear a voice that was not in tune with theirs, they felt they had to intervene immediately. So the lawyer had to check whether Jesus' teaching was in line with theirs. They had to save their bacon! So he asked Jesus: **'Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'**

Jesus has never spoken about eternal life on his own initiative because Jesus was not interested in it. This doctor of the Law wants to see whether Jesus believed in eternal life and how to obtain it. Jesus has never approached the subject of eternal life spontaneously. This topic didn't interest him. Jesus came to radically change our lives here in this earthly life. Once our present life is changed it acquires such quality that it becomes indestructible and, therefore, eternal. But, I repeat, Jesus never spoke spontaneously about eternal life. The ones who went to him asking about eternal life were people who were very well off, the rich, those who held power or doctors of the law. This lawyer turns to Jesus and asks what he should do to get eternal life. Jesus then said to him: **'What is written in the Law? What is your reading of it?'** Jesus keeps his distance because what the doctor of the Law wanted to know was written in his Law. In fact elsewhere Jesus will refer to it as “your Law”. This is a person who spent all his life doing nothing else but studying the Law. By “Law” they meant the first five books of the Bible, which contained Moses' message, the Covenant. But Jesus not only says: “What is written?”, but he also asks: “What is your understanding of it?”.

Jesus' question is laced with tremendous irony: it is not enough to know the Scriptures, we must also understand it. What is the difference? You can know the Bible by heart, you can study it day and night, you can preach it and announce it without understanding it. Why? This will be a

characteristic feature of Jesus: only those who orient their lives towards the benefit of others can understand the Scriptures. Therefore, the Bible cannot be understood by those who do not make the well-being of others the top priority of their existence.

For Jesus, there is no other value more important than the well-being of others. When some other values, such as a truth or a doctrine, are taking precedence over the well-being of people then sooner or later these values will turn against people. So often people are made to suffer in the name of a doctrine. For Jesus, there is no truth or doctrine more important than man's well-being. If this attitude is there, then the Scriptures can be understood, otherwise it is impossible. That is why Jesus asks: "What is your understanding of it?". The doctor of law replied: ***'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind'***: this is an excerpt from the book of Deuteronomy, (cf. Dt 6:5). Then he adds a precept taken from the book of Leviticus: ***'and your neighbour as yourself'*** (cf. Lv 19:18). The doctor's answer represents the summit, the highest peak that Jewish spirituality reached. Love for God is total and absolute, love for your neighbour is relative. You will love your neighbour as yourself. Therefore, there is a clear distinction: love for God is total and absolute, love for others is relative, like yourself. This is the apex of Jewish spirituality. Mind you, I say this because often I see that even Christians are confused: this is not for Jesus' community, for us Christians. This is the peak reached by Jewish spirituality. Love for God is absolute, love for others is relative. However, I stress, this is not Jesus' teaching of love for his community.

For Jesus' community, his teaching about love is contained in John's Gospel Chapter 13, verse 34: *'I give you a new commandment ...'*: "New" means "better" in terms of quality. Paradoxically, Jesus commands something that cannot be imposed. One can impose anything on people; the only thing one cannot impose is: "You must love me". A human being may be able to request and/or command almost anything: obedience, submission, service. However, one cannot impose on people to be fond of him. Even the most powerful person in the world cannot say: "I command you to love one another". This is because love resides in the innermost of us where, fortunately, no one else has control.

Then one wonders why Jesus commands the only thing that cannot be commanded? In fact, Jesus uses the term "commandment" in contrast with Moses' commandments. Jesus says: 'I leave you a commandment which, actually, is not a commandment' in order to set it against Moses' commandments. And what is this commandment? *'Love one another; you must love one another just as I have loved you'* (Jn 13:34). Jesus said: "As I have loved you" and not "As I will love you" which might have people thinking about his ultimate gift of his own life on the cross. He had shown his love with a gesture carried out previously.

At the beginning of Chapter 13 John the Evangelist says: *Jesus, knowing that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, having loved those who were his in the world, loved them to the end* (Jn 13:1). Jesus showed that he loved them to the end by carrying out the gesture of washing their feet. So *'As I have loved you'* means *'As I have served you'*. This is the only commandment that exists within the Christian community. It is not: *'Love God first and foremost and love to your neighbour as yourself'*, but *'Love for one another as he loved us'*, i.e. by serving us. There is no love if it is not expressed in concrete service.

Going back to the second part of the doctor of the Law's answer - ***'and your neighbour as***

yourself'- we realise that love for your neighbour is relative to yourself and not absolute. Jesus replied: *'You have answered right'*, i.e. 'Your answer is orthodox'. You see, it had been the doctor of the Law who quizzed Jesus, but in reality it was the other way round. Jesus then continues: *'Do this and life is yours'*.

The doctor of the law had asked Jesus what to do to obtain eternal life. Jesus instead in his answer does not mention eternal life. In other words, Jesus tries to make him understand: "Do not wonder about what you have to do to have eternal life, but instead ask yourself if the life you lead can be called life, if so do this and you will live".

The doctor of Law, cannot accept to be defeated in a public debate with Jesus, who had been already held up by scholars and Pharisees as "crazy ... and a blasphemer". Therefore, in order to justify himself, he carries on with his inquisitorial attitude. In fact, the Evangelist says: *But the man was anxious to justify himself and said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?'*

In the Jewish world, "neighbour" did not have the same connotations that it has acquired with the Christian message, which is "every person". At the time of Jesus, the idea of "neighbour" was widely debated and, according to different views, it could include:

- a) narrower interpretation: people that belong to my clan, to my family, to my tribe;
- b) wider interpretation: any Israeli person living inside Israel;
- c) very wide interpretation: it included also foreigners living within the borders of Israel.

As you can see, the idea of "neighbour" was not clear at the time of Jesus. It ranged from including only people belonging to your own clan, to foreigners living in Israel. Therefore, if the doctor of Law asks this question while wishing to justify himself, it was because he favoured the most restrictive interpretation.

And here is this Gospels' gem: this parable of the Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). Jesus tells it as an answer to the doctor of Law's question. *In answer Jesus said, 'A man was once on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of bandits; they stripped him, beat him and then made off, leaving him half dead'*. Jerusalem is located at 810 metres above sea level while Jericho, this man's destination, is 258 meters below sea level. Considering that they are barely thirty kilometres apart, there is an awesome difference in altitude of over 1000 metres, through gorges, in a difficult terrain to walk through. Along this route ambushes were common. Therefore, Jesus might have made reference to a news story of the time.

This man bumped into some brigands along a route that is difficult to walk through even if one is in good physical conditions because it is very hot in all seasons and it is difficult to breathe. The brigands beat him up and left him for dead. For him, death is certain unless along this lonely road a compassionate person comes along.

When we read the Gospels we must always put ourselves in the shoes of those who read or listened to this page of the Gospel for the first time; for us our limitation is that we know the Gospels more or less and know how the story ends. Therefore, because of our superficiality, we don't pay attention to those literary devices that the Evangelist uses to attract our attention. So when we read the Gospel we should always forget how the story ends.

Therefore, this poor man is lying half dead along the road and is facing certain death unless providentially a good person comes along. And in fact Jesus says: *Now a priest happened to be travelling down the same road, ...* It could not be better! Providentially a priest came along the same way. And this priest was not climbing up to Jerusalem, but going down to Jericho. This is an important detail. Jericho was a city inhabited by priests who, in turn, went up to Jerusalem, where they spent a week in the temple at the service of the altar. To be able to carry out their duties they had to be spiritually pure. Every day they would spend time in purification rites and prayers which made them worthy of standing before the Lord. This priest, who had just spent a week in the Lord's service, was a pure person. "Pure" means he was in full communication with God. For the poor man, it could not have happened better! Let us only hope he spots the dying man.

Jesus continues his story and says: ... *when he saw the man, ...* So it is done! Salvation has arrived. It could not have gone better. A priest comes along who had spent a whole week with the Lord and so he is at the height of his holiness. This pious priest saw the unfortunate man, and here is the cold shower: ... *he passed by on the other side.*

What happened? '*He saw the man*'! Why did '*he passed by on the other side*'? It is inexplicable! Is he a cruel man with a heart of stone? No, this was not it: he is simply a priest, i.e. a man of God. Having been for a week in contact with God, he was in a state of purity due to the continuous purification rites. He was also a pious person for all his incessant praying. Why then a man so full of God, so pure, '*passed by on the other side*' when seeing a man in obvious need? What did the doctor of the Law say?: 'Love for God is total and absolute, love for your neighbour is relative'.

Therefore, what the Evangelist is showing is that a believer may well come across a dilemma when there is a conflict between the application of God's Law and the well-being of man. When this happens, which one must one choose? Life sometimes leads to conflicts: God's Law tells us one thing, the well-being of a person would suggest that you choose another. You then are faced with a dilemma: Shall I observe God's Law even if it surely causes suffering to a person? Or shall I attend to the well-being of a person and, in so doing, ignore or break God's law?

This dilemma is not easy to tackle. What is more important? God's Law tells me to do one thing, the well-being of a person would require something different: which do I choose? Opting for one solution goes against the other. There is no room for compromise: one implies the other's elimination. If I choose to observe the law of God, a person suffers. If I opt for the well-being of a person, I break God's Law. The doctor of the Law had said: '*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind*'. Love for God is total. Love for your neighbour is on the same level as the love you have for yourself. It does not tell me to love my neighbours with all my soul, with all my strength, with all my mind. There is no comparison between love for my neighbour and love for God. Love for God absorbs the whole person, it is total and immediate, while love for others is relative: I love you in the same way I love myself; and, because I am limited, this love will be limited.

Therefore, the doctor of the Law has no doubts: if one had to choose between the observance of God's Law and the well-being of man, one would choose God's Law. This is unquestionable. God is always prioritised over man's well-being. By keeping God's Law you also benefit man. Then the doctor of Law has no doubt. So does the priest. Why does the priest, having seen this dying man, '*passed by on the other side*'? Because he, having to choose between the two commandments, the

love for God and the well-being of man, has no hesitation: the respect of God's Law is more important than the well-being of man.

And what does God's Law say? In the book of Leviticus, it is prescribed that a priest should not become “unclean” by touching a dead or injured person. A high priest could not even touch the corpse of his father or his mother because he would become unclean if he did.

In this episode, we have a priest who is not going from Jericho up to Jerusalem, but he is walking down from Jerusalem. He, therefore, smells of incense; he radiates holiness and purity. He comes across a dying man and what does he do? If he stops and helps him, he contravenes the law of God, who prescribes: “You are a priest and you can't approach a moribund, an injured person as you might become impure”. The priest is not a callous or cruel person. It is worse: he is a religious person. Religious people are the worst people we can come across in our lives because religion makes people inhumane. Remember when we said that with religion man had to get away from other people in order to get closer to God. That's why religious people are often so unresponsive, so inhumane. They are concentrating so hard on God that they ignore people's suffering.

Religion is inhumane because it is atheistic. Religion is atheistic and makes people atheistic. “Atheistic” means without God. In religion, a man separates himself from others in order to elevate himself towards God. Instead, with Jesus, God came down to meet man. One climbs up, the other comes down: they never meet. The more pious a person and the more he climbs up, the further he goes from God, who instead descended towards us and put himself to the service of man.

So this priest is not a cruel person, he is simply a religious person. Obedience to the law prevented him from helping others. He was facing this dilemma: is the observance of God's law more important than the well-being of that person? The priest had no doubt: he choose observance of the Law. The Evangelist is denouncing a law that has become a poison, because it neutralises the normal responses of love that a person should have towards others.

One does not need to be “a priest” or belong to a religious order to try and help someone who is badly in need: one just need to have a minimum of compassion. For a religious person instead obeying the Law is more important than people's well-being. This is what the Evangelist is denouncing in this page. This priest, therefore, behaves badly while he is convinced he is doing the right thing and doesn't do the right thing because he is convinced that it would be wrong. It's terrible!

In the same way a Levite who came to the place saw him, and passed by on the other side. The Levites belonged to the tribe of Levi and were involved with everything concerning the worship in the temple. This Levite was also a person who was supposed to be in a state of ritual purity. The Evangelist is very severe in his complaint: he is showing that the religious people are more dangerous than bandits. Bandits wound, religious people kill! Religious people are so dedicated to respecting God's law that they do not realise that this law is causing suffering in people.

The novelty that Jesus brought is that whenever there was conflict between God's Law and the well-being of man, Jesus did not hesitate: Jesus always chose the well-being of man.

The parable does not end here: ***But a Samaritan traveller who came on him was moved with***

compassion when he saw him. The third character that appears here was considered the worst kind of person one could imagine: in this episode, Jesus introduces a Samaritan. With the first two there was a hope that they could help the victim; with a Samaritan, there is no chance: this is the end for the poor man!

Who were the Samaritans in the social context of the time? The Samaritans were the enemy of the people of Israel, they were heretics, possessed by demons and impure. Whenever Samaritans and Jews met, there was often violence and it could end up with someone getting killed. So the situation was not promising. Imagine an enemy of the people of Israel, a Samaritan, came across a wounded Israeli person lying half dead along the road, he got nearer and ... , I would have expected that he would have finished him off. Therefore, from the wounded man's point of view, the Samaritan was the most dangerous person that could have come along, a despised person, a person from whom he could not expect anything good.

On the contrary, here is the skill of the Evangelist, the artist and the theologian: he '*was moved with compassion when he saw him*'. This single sentence is an extraordinary theological revelation. The verb "to see" together with "to have compassion" are Old Testament expressions used exclusively to describe some actions of God. In the New Testament, they are used only for Jesus. Therefore, these are divine actions.

We have to understand that the Israeli people distinguished between "to have compassion" and "to have mercy". The first expression describes a divine action with which God gives back life to those who have no life. The second expression refers to a human action with which a person helps someone who is experiencing some difficulties.

Therefore, the expression that should be used when referring to a man is "to have mercy", when referring to God is "to have compassion". This last expression is used three times in this Gospel: here in this parable; when Jesus meets the funeral cortège of the only son of the widow of Nain to whom he gives his life back; finally, in the parable of the "Prodigal Son" when the father, on seeing his son who had come back home, felt compassion towards him and, in so doing, gave him back his life. The expression "to have compassion" was never used to describe a human action or a feeling. The only time that it is referred to a human being is in this episode when the Evangelist says that this Samaritan, who was considered a heretic, possessed by demons, a sinner and a person far removed from God, '*was moved with compassion*'. In fact, he was the only one who acted like God.

The Evangelist is saying something extraordinary here, which will radically change the concept of "believer". Who is he the "believer"? For religion, the believer is the one who, obeying God, observes all his Laws. The priest of this parable is a believer, because, when choosing between love for God and love for a neighbour, he thinks that love for God is more important. The Bible says that, as a priest, he cannot approach a bleeding wounded person, otherwise he becomes unclean. He observes God's Law and therefore he is a believer. The results, as we have seen, are that these people are more dangerous than murderers.

With Jesus, the concept of "believer" changes radically. "Believer" is the one who practises a similar love to God's and therefore looks more like him. There is no longer a law to obey, but a love to imitate. It is the law that divides men between observant and non-observant, pure and impure. Love is different: it unites all people, because it can be practised even by those who, for their

moral, religious or sexual conduct, are considered excluded from the action of God, and therefore, the ones furthest away from God.

In this episode, Jesus could not find a person furthest from God than a Samaritan. The despised Samaritan, who was considered furthest from God, is the only one who acts like God. By observing God's Law, we can cause suffering to man. How many times when faced with a person's actual suffering we leave him/her alone because of the 'divine law'.

Jesus distances himself from the divine law; Jesus never acts in obedience to the divine laws, but always for the well-being of man and with the Father's love. It is the religious authorities who act according to the divine laws which ultimately shows how empty they are, filled only with their arrogance and pretences. The proof of this is that they never invoke God's Law when it is for the well-being of people, but always to prop up their institutions.

Therefore, the Samaritan *'was moved with compassion when he saw him'*. With the following lines, the Evangelist describes what this 'bad lot' did in contrast with the priest's and Levite's actions. ***He went up to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. He then lifted him onto his own mount and took him to an inn and looked after him.*** It was a difficult path; usually it was travelled with the help of a donkey. The Samaritan, unflinchingly, gives his mount to a stranger! The well-being of this stranger is more important than his. By offering his mount to a stranger and leading him to an inn, the Samaritan puts himself in the position of a servant. Normally, it was the servant that went on foot while his master travelled on the mount. The Samaritan behaves like God because God is love that puts himself at the service of man. ***Next day, he took out two denarii and handed them to the innkeeper and said, "Look after him". and on my way back I will make good any extra expense you have"***.

Twice in this episode the Evangelist has used the expression *'Passed by on the other side'* to describe the priest's and the Levite's behaviour. By contrast, he uses the terms "to look after him" twice when referring to what the Samaritan did. *"And on my way back I will make good any extra expense you have"*. His love for this stranger is completely free, fully unconditional, a love that doesn't look at the person's merits, but only at his needs. While in religion God's love depends on whether a person deserves it, with Jesus, it is attracted by a person's needs. Not everyone can have merits, but all have needs.

And here is Jesus' question: ***'Which of these three [priest, Levite and Samaritan], do you think, proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the bandits' hands?'*** This, however, is the reverse of the doctor of the Law's question. The doctor wanted to know: "Who is my neighbour". With this question, the doctor of the Law wanted to know how far his love should extend. Jesus instead showed who had been a neighbour to the dying man. The doctor asks what should be the upper reach of his love, Jesus instead tell him where to start. Then the doctor wanted a limit, Jesus replied that there is no limit. For Jesus, a neighbour is not the one who receives love, but the one who loves. A neighbour is not the object of love, but the one who loves in the same way as God.

In fact, Jesus asks: *'Which of these three, do you think, proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the bandits' hands?'*. One would expect: 'The Samaritan' as an answer. However, the story told by Jesus is so outrageous that the doctor of the Law refused to utter the word 'Samaritan', but instead replied: ***'The one ...'***, using a very derogatory term. Furthermore, do you remember that

Jesus had said that the Samaritan *'was moved with compassion when he saw him'*? The doctor of Law, however, does not tolerate that a man and, what is more, a sinner, can behave like God. He therefore replied: ***'The one who showed pity towards him'***. Do you remember the distinction between “to have compassion” (attributable only to God) and “to have mercy” (man's attitude)? Jesus, in this story, stresses that man can act like God: the Samaritan loved and, therefore, felt compassion, just like God. The doctor of the Law, however, does not tolerate this and answers Jesus: *'The one who showed pity towards him'*. ***Jesus said to him, 'Go, and do the same yourself.'***

Therefore, Jesus dismissed this doctor of Law with the advice to make himself a neighbour to others, by orienting his life to the well-being of others and to make sure his love for others is translated into service to others. Jesus' words fell on deaf ears, because the next time we will meet these lawyers in this Gospel they will again be in opposition to Jesus, and always in favour of the Law as their defensive position: God's Law is more important than man's well-being.

In fact, we will meet these doctors of the Law in the synagogue in an episode in which this dilemma is well highlighted: can a man with a withered hand be cured on a Sabbath? Every person of common sense would say yes; religious people disregard common sense and say no. Why can't you heal a person who has a withered arm? Because on a Sabbath you cannot carry out any work (cf Lk 6:6-11). Therefore, in order to obey God's Law and show him respect, one disrespects man. You, therefore, see that Jesus' words: *'Go, and do the same yourself'* will have no effect.

In this parable we see that Jesus changes two important concepts: the first is the concept of “Neighbour”. A neighbour is not the one who is loved, but the one who loves. For the Christian, a neighbour is not the object of my love, the person I love, the person my love is directed to, but the subject of such love: i.e. I am “Neighbour”, because I am the starting point of this love towards others. The question then is not “How far can my love reach?”, but “Where does it start from?” That is: love as God loves. The second concept that Jesus changes is that of “Believer”. Indeed, a believer is the one who resembles God by practising a love similar to his. It doesn't matter if you are a heretic, if you don't pray or do not observe the Law. The important thing is the attitude one has towards others. Anyone who acts moved by love, anyone with an attitude of service towards others is the true believer in the eyes of the Lord. On the other hand, you can have people who are so pious, so devout, so religious, but who never help anybody, or never make themselves “neighbours” to the needy: these people might well be alright with the Law, but certainly not with the Lord. Jesus, in fact, does not ask us to observe the Law but to practice love in a similar way to him.

In religion, sin is like a code: if you break it, you sin. With Jesus, sin is about the evil we do to others. The Gospels always bring us back to Jesus' teachings, according to which, the most important value is the well-being of man. If we consider a truth or a doctrine more important than man, sooner or later in the name of this truth or doctrine we will hurt man. For Jesus, there is nothing more sacred in the existence of an individual than operating for the well-being of others in a concrete way.

2nd Meeting: Wednesday, December 13, 2007

We will now have a look at one of the most beautiful Parables, that of "The prodigal son". Let us analyse its context first. When, in John's Gospel, one of the disciples, Philip, asks Jesus: *'Lord show us the Father and then we shall be satisfied'*, Jesus said to him: *'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?'* (Jn 14:8-9). This is an important statement that we should always keep in mind when we read the Gospels. Jesus here is merely explaining what the Evangelist had formulated in a theological manner at the end of his Prologue: *'No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known'* (Jn 1:18). A peremptory statement: no one has ever seen God. This, however, contradicts the Scripture, because the Bible says that Moses saw God (cf Ex 24) and Elijah made an experience of God (cf 1K 19). John disagrees: *'No one has ever seen God'*. Then if no one, not even Moses, had seen God, how could he manifest the will of this God, who he had never seen and, therefore, he did not know, to his people?

The Evangelist invites us to make a preliminary act before we approach the Gospel: every image or idea of God we have in our mind, born of traditions or from religious devotions, often from superstitions or human fears, all of these images that do not conform to what Jesus said or did should be eliminated because they are incomplete or wrong. That is why Jesus said to Philip: *'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father'* (Jn 14:9). So what does this mean? It is not that Jesus is like God, but that God is like Jesus. What is the meaning of this expression that may seem garbled? If I say that Jesus is like God it means that I know God. If I say that Jesus is equal to God, it means that somehow I know this God. Not Jesus is equal to God, but God is equal to Jesus. That is, we do not know God, we only know Jesus. Therefore, we compare all that has been written and become known about God with what we know that Jesus has done and taught us: we keep what is in agreement and must reject what differs from Jesus' teachings and actions.

Therefore, in order to figure out who God is we must focus all our attention on Jesus. The drama of us Christians is that we know little about Jesus, because we do not know well enough the works in which Jesus is presented, which are the Gospels. Once we know Jesus and, as a consequence, God then the relationship of man with sin and God changes radically.

In all religions, God threatens sinners with punishments. God and sinners are at opposing ends. A person guilty of sin must go on a particular path of conversion to obtain forgiveness. The path is like this: the person who sins must repent and therefore as a condition of repentance, he/she must denounce the evil committed and offer a sacrifice to atone for his/her sin. Only after all this, is forgiveness eventually granted. Jesus, who is the full manifestation of God, acts in a totally different manner. That is why Jesus shocked religious, pious and devout people, those who have aimed at getting into a relationship with God through their own merits.

These people know what God can do or can't do, how he thinks and, more specifically, they know that the love of God has to be deserved through their own efforts. These people do not accept Jesus' teachings that God's love does not need to be deserved, but it is simply to be accepted as a free gift, because the God of Jesus does not look at people's merits, but at their needs.

One may wonder why the God of Jesus does not refer to people's list of merits? The answer is

simple: if God looked to people's merits, he would look at a very small number of people, because not everyone can or wants to gain merits and offer them to God. It is different if the Lord looks at people's needs: we all are needy. There is not a single person who is not in need of his love. By following this line, Jesus' God feels himself attracted towards needy people, the sinners. These are exactly those that religious people, those who are so pious and devout want to keep at a safe distance.

According to Jewish tradition, one had to keep a distance of at least two metres from sinners. One had to avoid them and, if possible, not to have any contact with them, not even to encourage them to convert: one could only pray that God would destroy them. Let us then imagine the scandal provoked by Jesus when he not only did not avoid sinners, but looked for them. Jesus did not invite people to convert, repent and offer sacrifices in order to obtain God's forgiveness, but he behaved as if sin did not exist. He treated it in a completely new way.

Let us now examine Luke's Gospel at chapter 15, verses 1-2: ***The tax collectors and sinners, however, were all crowding round to listen to him, and the Pharisees and scribes complained saying, 'This man welcomes sinners and eat with them'*** (Lk 15:1-2). The scribes are the doctors of the Law. Who are the Pharisees? The word Pharisee means "separate". A Pharisee is a layman that separates himself from the rest of the people by way of a particular lifestyle and through prayers, self-denial and offerings: he is the spiritual "cream" of the people. The Pharisees are the ones who keep themselves separated from others through their devotions and prayers. '*Saying, This man ...*'. Notice their contempt. They avoid calling Jesus by name.

Last night we warn you to be wary of religion because religion makes people atheistic, because in religion man separates himself from others in an attempt to climb up to a God he will never meet. God, in fact, has come down to meet man. Religious people climb up, God comes down and they never meet. These religious people, therefore, who for their lifestyle, their prayers, their holiness, seemed to be more in touch with God, not only they do not recognise God in Jesus, but they despise him deeply and will materially contribute to his murder. The Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying: '***This man welcomes sinners and eat with them'***. Jesus welcomes sinners, without asking them to change their lives and, scandal of all scandals, he '*... eats with them'*. This is outrageous!

In order to understand these pious people's alarm, we need to understand the Jewish culture. At the time, people ate altogether picking food with their hands from the same tray positioned in the middle. If one of the people who had been invited was infected, his infection would contaminate the tray causing everyone else to become infected. If one of the fellow diners was a sinner, his impurity would be passed on to all others. This explains why they denounce Jesus for eating with sinners. Jesus himself is impure because he becomes contaminated by eating with sinners.

They did not understand the novelty brought by Jesus. For them a sinful man was unworthy to approach the Lord: that was what they taught. But this is perverse because it means that many people can never approach the Lord. 'You as a sinner cannot approach the Lord'. 'But who then can take away my sin?' 'The Lord'. 'Then I go to the Lord'. 'No, you can't because you're a sinner'. You understand that this is atrocious. I live in a state of sin; the only one who can break me free from this situation is the Lord; however, as long as I am in this situation of sin, I cannot turn to him; I am in total despair. I repeat, this is perverse!

People living in a state of sin were thrown into deep despair because for them there was no hope. Unfortunately, these situations are present even today. Fortunately, Jesus, in a decisive and clear manner, in his teaching and in practice, proves exactly the opposite: “This is not true, he says: let me come to you and I will purify you. You do not need to purify yourself in order to receive me, but, on the contrary, by letting me come to you, I will purify you”.

You will understand that this is an earthquake. In the religious world, people are told that sinners cannot approach the Lord because they are unworthy of him. However the Lord says: "Let me come to you, I only ask you to receive me", "... but I can't ...", "but just try ...". Jesus encourages people to commit what is a sacrilege in the eye of religion just so that they accept his love.

We have numerous episodes in the Gospel that show this. Think about the episode of that woman suffering from an ugly venereal disease, a continuous blood flow, for twelve years. This kept her constantly in a state of impurity. But she sneaks through the crowd and *'She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak; and the haemorrhage stopped at that very moment'* (Lk 8, 44). The death penalty was envisaged for an infected woman that touched a healthy person. If Jesus had been a pious and religious person, he would have reproached her severely: "How dare you vile woman, with that ugly disease, make me dirty, the Holy one from God". But what in the eyes of religion is considered a sacrilege, in the eyes of Jesus is considered a gesture of faith. Jesus, instead, turns around and says: *'My daughter, your faith has saved you; go in peace'* (Luke 8, 48).

Therefore, people who live in sin are afraid of going against the religious law and approach the Lord because they have been taught that they would commit a sacrilege. Jesus, instead, invites people to transgress. If you dare to transgress, you will not incur in a curse but, on the contrary, you will receive a blessing. What in the eyes of religion is a sacrilege, in the eyes of Jesus is an act of faith.

Jesus, then, faced with the charge of being an unclean person, aimed this parable at the scribes and Pharisees, i.e. at those spiritual, religious and devout people, at all those people who think they can earn God's love through their own efforts. An unfortunate group! At the end of their lives, when these people will meet the Lord, they will say: "I have sacrificed all my life for you". And the eternal Father will ask them: "Oh my son, when did I ever request that?" "But how? I have made my best effort, I have repressed many desires". "But who asked you to do that?". "I have made so many sacrifices, I gave up so many things". "But how did get in your head that you needed to do this?". So the message of this parable is aimed at those people who sacrifice their lives in order to earn God's love.

Just before the parable of "The Prodigal Son" there are two other parables, that of "Lost Sheep" (Luke 15, 4-7) and "The Lost Coin" (Luke 15, 8-10), in which Jesus announces God's great joy in welcoming sinners. In this parable in Luke's chapter 15, from verse 11, Jesus explains why. ***'There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, let me have the share of the estate that will come to me". So the father divided the property between them'***. A man with two sons; the younger one wants his share of the inheritance. For the younger son his father is already dead. He does not think of him as alive, he considers him already dead. All he wants is money, his share of the inheritance. Well, the father, quite surprisingly, agrees and divides his assets between his two children, giving the elder a greater share in accordance with custom and law of the time. ***'A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant***

country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery'.

This expression “*distant country*” means that the son did not only leave his father, but also abandoned the religion and traditions of his forefathers and went to a pagan land, a land of idolatry. So he did not abandon only his father and traditions, but he also abandoned his God. *'He squandered his money on a life of debauchery'*. This expression indicates that this guy is ineffective and feeble. He took hold of his part of the inheritance that, as far as we can guess, seemed to be rather substantial, and in a short period of time he wasted the lot. This also shows he is a very immature person, unable to manage his life, what he was and what he had. The rush to possess turned into a rush to dissipate.

'When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch'. This youngster had staked everything on money, but once he realised he had nothing, he felt like nothing.

Luke is the evangelist that more than any other takes aim at the themes of the rich and of wealth. He makes a fierce denunciation: rich people bet everything on money. If one has money then he has something and he is someone, but if one has no money, then he has nothing and he is nothing. This young man then ends up with no money and, therefore, he is nothing, totally destitute.

'So he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs'.

He, therefore, became a serf of someone who lived in that region. He had left a father and now he finds himself under a boss. At home, he was a master; now he works for someone who sends him into his fields to feed the pigs. This young man has slid down, little by little to the lowest rung in the social culture – feeding pigs – not so much for the job itself, but because pigs were considered 'unclean'. This boy had really fallen to the most ignominious level of degradation. Not only from being a master in his own house, he had become a serf, but also he ended up living with pigs: a beast among beasts.

In summary, he had left his father, he had abandoned his God, and now he found himself covered in impurity up to his neck. ***'And he would willingly have filled himself with the husks the pigs were eating but no one would let him have them'***. He was treated worse than the pigs he was tending because at least pigs were given food to eat, he was given nothing; he had to fend for himself and scavenge whatever he could find.

According to tradition, God's punishment for sinners is manifested in the lack of help they received. The book of Ben Sira says: *'Give to the good, and do not go to the help of a sinner'* (Si 12:7). Therefore, the fact that he is in need means that he is cursed by God.

Once he reached the maximum of degradation, tending to pigs, once he realised he was starving, the Evangelist writes: ***'Then he came to his senses and said, "How many of my father's hired men have all the food they want and more, and here am I dying of hunger"'***. The young man begins to think, but always in terms of himself. Here the verb “to die” appears three times signifying that it is really the end – complete death.

“...My father's hired men have more food than they need”: this implied that his father was a generous employer. His servants had plenty of food. In Jewish customs, there were strict rules on how to treat servants, but the fact that they had food in abundance means that this father was

generous not only with his children but also with his servants.

The Evangelist continues and says: '*I will leave this place and go to my father ...*'. For the full understanding of this parable, we must bear in mind that he returns to his father not because he repented: there is no regret for the pain he had caused to his father. He doesn't say: "I am sorry for the suffering my behaviour brought on to my father ... who knows how much pain he has gone through ... he has not heard from me ...". He has no remorse for the suffering he caused and is still causing to his father. He only thinks about his belly: he does not miss his father, he only misses food. He, therefore, decides to return out of his own interest.

Sometimes in the Church's teachings this young man is represented as a model of conversion and repentance. This is not the case: this is a guy who always acted for his own convenience and self-interest. He finds himself dying of starvation and so he decides to return home. He goes back home not because he repented, but out of self-interest.

'... and say: "***Father, I have sinned against heaven ...***". "To sin against heaven" meant to sin against God. That entailed that God would erase you from the book of Life. "***...and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men***". According to the law at the time, since the younger son had already received his share of the inheritance, he was no longer entitled to be re-admitted to the rank of son. Therefore, this son, who was erased from the Book of Life by God, was also sure that he had been dropped by his family. Having lost the right to be still considered a son, he asks to be hired as a labourer. His line of thinking is like this: "Here in a foreign land I am a servant and I'm dying of hunger. I'm better off going back home and work as a servant in my father's house; at least there I eat, as my father's servants have plenty of food".

From here the revelation of who God is begins in a progressive manner. Remember that nobody has ever seen God, only Jesus revealed how he really is. Jesus in this teaching shows who God is and how he acts towards sinners.

In the tradition of religion, God resides in the temple. Man must go to God in the Temple, humble himself, ask for forgiveness and offer a sacrifice in atonement for his sins. The Father, as presented by Jesus, behaves differently.

The Evangelist continues: '*So he left the place and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion ...*'. You will remember what we said last night about the Samaritan who saw the injured man and felt compassion. This is the third time that in this Gospel the expression "he saw and had compassion" appears. As we have seen previously that "to have compassion" is a technical expression which indicates a Divine action with which God gives life back to someone who has lost it. Therefore, this father saw his son when he was still far away and had compassion. '***... He ran to the boy ...***'. This is another disconcerting detail and I explain why. In the Middle Eastern world, the rhythms of life are not the same as ours. There is no hurry, haste does not exist, everything is much calmer, more relaxed. They are poor, but they always have a lot of time. No one ever runs. Running or rushing is considered bad manners and, in the case of a grown up person, as in the case of this father, an act of dishonour. Therefore running by an adult person, especially when running to meet someone inferior to him, is looked upon as a dishonourable gesture.

Jesus, in this parable, tells us that the father's eagerness and desire to give back to his son the honour he had lost - remember that he had disgraced himself by becoming a swineherd - is more important than his own honour. God does not act as an offended deity, but, like a father; he does not hesitate to dishonour himself in order to honour his son. You can also see in this episode a similarity with the immense love of Jesus, son of God and equal to the Father, in so much as he does not hesitate to accept a shameful death on a Cross in order to restore honour to man. Going back to our parable, it was the son that, as a person of lower status, should have run towards his father, and not the father.

As the son has decided to go back to his father, it is the father who, with his heart full of joy, puts aside customs and rules, takes the initiative and rushes towards him. So he does not behave as an offended and enraged deity, he does not bear a grudge, but rushes out to meet him.

Let us try and listen to this story as if we did not know how it ends: '*... clasped him in his arms ...*' The father runs towards his wretched son, a son who had squandered his inheritance and had become a swineherd and flings himself at him. And I've always imagined that he would strangle him for how he had worn himself to a frazzle. At home he could have been a master; leaving home he had become a swineherd. Instead here is the surprise: '*... and kissed him*'.

The Evangelist refers back to the first great act of forgiveness that appears in the Old Testament. That, as well, was about an inheritance, a rivalry between brothers caused by an inheritance. Inheritance, both in the Old Testament and in the Gospels, is always seen in a negative way, a toxic fruit with which parents poison their children's lives. This is because if one leaves an inheritance it means he has accumulated more than he needed, and if he has accumulated, it means he was not a generous person: so the inheritance becomes toxic. An inheritance is a subtle form of revenge with which parents chastise their children. This is why even if the parents divide their estate equally between their children, there will always be someone who would expect more because, e.g., he visited his old parents more often than the others. It is often the case that an inheritance is the cause of hatred, enmity and other terrible things between siblings. For Jesus, inheritance is always the result of avarice and greed: attitudes that bar people from God. It is, therefore, a poisoned fruit.

However, what is this first great act of forgiveness that appears in the Old Testament? Isaac had two children. The elder son, Esau, was to inherit his father's estate. However, the younger son, Jacob, taking advantage of the absence of Esau and of the fact that his father was totally blind, disguised himself as Esau. His father, believing he was with his elder son, gave him all his inheritance. Jacob, well aware that he had grossly misbehaved, ran away. Imagine then Jacob's anxiety when he saw Esau appearing at the top of the hill at the head of 400 men on horseback. He must have thought it was the end for him. After all, Esau had a reputation for being a skilled hunter and a great warrior. Esau took off towards Jacob at a gallop, he reached him and threw himself on his neck '*and wept as he kissed him*' (Gn 33:4). Kissing in the Bible signifies forgiveness. Esau lost his inheritance, but his generosity is bigger than his brother's greed and he is able to forgive him.

Jesus here turns the tables on the religious world: in the religious world a sinner had to ask God for forgiveness and offer sacrifices to obtain it. Here it is the father who runs towards his son and even before his son had the time to open his mouth he '*clasped him in his arms and kissed him*'. (a more literal translation would be: he threw himself at his neck and fondly kissed him). He forgave him. However, doesn't the son have to repent, ask for forgiveness, offer sacrifices and

warranties? This father does not expect all this. The Father-God forgives before forgiveness is asked for. Therefore, the Gospels make us understand that the most useless thing for us to do is to ask God forgiveness. Jesus never invites sinners to ask God for forgiveness, because God never forgives as he never feels offended. God is love and he bestows his love on everyone, regardless of their behaviour. While it is true that Jesus invites you to ask God for forgiveness, he insistently urges men to forgive one another. God's forgiveness becomes effective only when it is translated into love towards others. That father throws himself around his son's neck and kisses him; that father forgives his son before his son utters the act of contrition that he had prepared.

However, the son is perturbed since he did not expect such a reception. He is disconcerted by his father's embrace. Let us remember that the son had been a swineherd and, therefore, unclean. The father should have told him to purify himself before he could touch him. If the father embraces his son who is impure, the impurities of the son would be transferred to the father. Well, the father's desire to show his love for his son, to let him know how big his love is, is greater than the son's impurity. The father becomes impure in people's eyes in order to restore the purity of his son. However, the son is unsure and says: *'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son'*. The full act of contrition the son had prepared also included: *'... treat me as one of your hired men'*. But the father did not allow him to finish his pre-prepared speech. He does not care how badly his son had behaved, he only wanted to show him how much he loved him.

The Evangelist wants us to understand that the encounter between a sinful man and the Lord does not require the demeaning and detailed recounting of one's meanness and misdemeanours, but makes one experience that always exhilarating feeling of how immense the Father's love is. It is not the sinner who must speak, it is the father who speaks. It is not God who must listen to the sinner, but the sinner who must appreciate how great God's love is. This is something that perhaps we never understood before.

In fact, the parable continues: *'But the father said to his servants, "Quick! - there is urgency - Bring out the best robe and put it on him"'*. This is not simply a change of clothes. The father does not call for clean clothes, but for the best robe. In those days, clothes were expensive, almost a luxury. For example, when a king wanted to reward one of his officers, or confer upon him a higher ranking, he would give him the best robe as a gift. In the book of Genesis, when Joseph was recognized as innocent, the Pharaoh made him governor of the whole of Egypt and *'he dressed him in robes of fine linen'* (Gn 41:42).

Therefore, the father gave his son, who had just come back, a reward! It was something foolish! On this son, who had squandered everything, who had been reckless and incompetent, the father bestows an award, i.e. he restores him to his place in the family and gives him even more authority than he had before.

This is followed by another crazy gesture. Only a fool could do what this father did. Here we have someone who is only interested in money. He wanted his share of the inheritance and in a short time he lost it all. You would not trust him with any money because he proved to be incapable of administering it. Yet his father says: *'... put a ring on his finger ...'*. Why does the father think of giving him a ring? This was not simply a piece of jewellery. At that time, they did not have cheques books or credit cards. When the master of the house had to make purchases he used the ring with

the seal of the family. This ring, when it was impressed on a wax tablet was the equivalent of a credit card. The ring was held by the household's administrator.

Well, this father puts all his possessions and belongings in the hands of his reckless and incapable son, who has not been able to administer his share of the inheritance. Only a fool would do such a thing. I would have expected him to say: "Now come home, let's see how you behave, show me that you deserve to be trusted and then ...". Instead nothing of the sort! The father bestows more trust than before on him by entrusting him with the administration of the house. We don't know how this story ends. But one could well envisage that after a night of celebrations with the fattened calf and a generous amount of wine, while everyone is asleep, this son who now holds the ring, i.e. the household's credit card, could quietly run away again. On waking up, the father would find that he had been stripped of everything. It is a big risk! But the father wants his son to understand that not only he did not lose confidence in him, but he wanted to grant him even more trust.

However, this is not all: '*... and sandals on his feet*'. When there was a bereavement people took off their sandals as an expression of mourning. This son was considered dead, but now he has come back to life: the sandals are a sign of life. Furthermore, the boy had said to his father: '*I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men*'. Well, in those days only the masters of the house wore sandals, all other people went barefoot. If he had been accepted back into the house as a labourer he would have gone barefoot. His father says: "No, you resume your life here as you were before leaving and you continue to be a master". This is the significance of the sandals.

And there is more: '*Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast ...*'. In those days, people rarely ate meat and only at religious holidays. For the father, his son's return is equivalent to a religious festival. That calf was reared to honour God. Now the father uses it to honour his son with the following justification: '*Because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found*'. *And they began to celebrate.*

And now the real protagonist makes his entrance. You will remember that this parable was told to the Pharisees and scribes, religious people who criticised Jesus. They don't tolerate the idea that God is close to sinners, because they have established a separation between God and sinners. They know that you, in that condition of impurity, can't get close to the Lord, even if you're suffering, even if you are in need. They know exactly who can and who cannot approach the Lord! They do not tolerate this Jesus who, not only does not shun sinners, but goes and look for them. Therefore, the real protagonist of this parable is the character who now enters the scene.

'Now the elder son was out in the fields ...'. The word "elder" in Greek means "priest": the priests were members of the Sanhedrin, the Sanhedrin was the highest legal organ of Israel. They were the ones that pronounced judgements, the ones that condemned. Therefore with the character of the elder son the Evangelist represents the scribes and Pharisees. '*... and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about*'. The elder son displays a strange behaviour: from the fields, he walks back home to what was a house of mourning. His father had said that for him the younger son had died. So the house was always full of sadness. When he heard music and dancing from afar he should immediately have thought: "Either my father has gone out of his mind or something extraordinary has happened. What could be so extraordinary other than my brother is back?". But he is not

expecting his brother back. On hearing music and dancing, he does not hurry to see what is happening, but he froze up; he is a dark character, he is the image of religious people.

Religious people and happiness are incompatible. Religious people have always an austere face because all their life is dedicated to efforts to deserve the love of God. They must show to everybody how difficult their life is and therefore they are incompatible with joy. The elder son did not rush towards the house but, instead, he stopped, called a servant and asked what was happening.

'The servant told him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the calf we had been fattening because he has got him back safe and sound"'. Now that he knows the reason for all that merriment, he should run in and embrace his brother. Instead: ***'He was angry then and refused to go in'***. The father's joy is in stark contrast with the elder son's anger. Likewise, Jesus' joy in being with sinners - so that he can expose them to the love of God and expunge what makes them impure - is in contrast with the anger of pious and religious people who want to deserve the love of God and do not tolerate that the same love is bestowed upon those who, in their eyes, do not deserve it. "I spent the whole of my life working hard to deserve God's love and that one who is a scoundrel gets forgiveness and love just like me. This is not fair". It is true, this is not fair. Love goes beyond justice, love is generosity.

Therefore, the elder son refused to go in. So ***'... his father came out and began to urge him to come in'***. The father maintains the same attitude towards his two sons. He does not behave like a master: it is he who goes out. The father should have waited there and expected his son to go in. Not so: he goes out towards his older son in the same way he previously run towards his younger one. This is not a father who gives orders to his son, but a servant who begs his master. In fact, the Evangelist says: ***'... begun to urge him'***. And the Evangelist continues by making the most awesome portrait of a religious person, a person that is hostile to God's love. ***'But he retorted to his father, "All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours..."'*** Slaved? How can he say that? Isn't he a son? Isn't he a master in the house? Remember: in the beginning Jesus said that the father had divided among his children all his property. Clearly, this elder son does not have a filial relationship with his father, but that of a servant towards his master. Religion has imposed a servant-master relationship towards the Lord based on obedience. Jesus came to reveal that ours is a relationship between children and their father, not based on obedience, but on practising a love similar to his, i.e. unconditional. Here we have a servant who obeys his father but does not accept his love. Rather he complains about his father: ***"... yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends ..."***. He expects a reward for his behaviour.

The Evangelist is decrying that religion produces childish people. ***'You never offered me so much as a kid!'*** His father answers: "But all this stuff is yours! I have given it to you! I have divided my estate between my two children: between the rascal who wasted it all and you". Notice the irony: the inheritance was divided and given, on one hand, to a son who wasted it all and, on the other hand, to a son who was incapable of using it.

The Evangelist here makes us understand how pathetic and ridiculous religious people are. Obedience to the Law, supported by the scribes and Pharisees, makes people immature, childlike and incapable of autonomy. They always need a master to tell them what to do and what not to do and in the end they expect a reward for good behaviour. In other words, they do not want to take responsibility for what they do. This is typical of childish and immature people! Jesus does not

need childish people, he needs grown up people.

“... **But, for this son of yours, ...**”. Notice a feature that is also common in our families: when a son needs to be reprimanded it is “Your son”; when, on the contrary, one brags about, then it is “My son”. There is something similar here: he should have said: “But, for my brother...”. Obviously the younger son is no longer a brother to him! “... **when he comes back after swallowing up your property -- he and his loose women ... --**”. 'Loose women'? How does he know? It had not been said before. Jesus had said that *'he squandered his money on a life of debauchery'*, but did not go into details. This again is typical of religious people. They feel able, in fact, they think it is their duty, to judge other people's lives. All their holiness blinds them and becomes a beam that distorts their vision. They know everything!

“... **you kill the calf we had been fattening.**” *The father said, “My son ...*”. Here the father uses an expression full of tenderness. A more literal translation would be: “My child”, “... **you are with me always and all I have is yours ...**”. Here the father is saddened that his son did not understand the fact that everything he had was all his and, therefore, there was no need for him to give him anything.

Let us now go briefly to Matthew's Gospel, the parable of The Talents, chapter 25, from verses 14 to 30. There is a gentleman who leaves for a trip and gives a huge sum of money to his officers. When he gets back he does not ask to have his money back. Instead he says to the one who was given five talents and earned another five: “Please, take part in what I have”. Therefore, this is a very generous person. The one who had received only one talent says: “*Sir, I had heard you were a hard man, reaping where you had not sown and gathering where you had not scattered; so I was afraid, and I went off and hid your talent in the ground. Here it is; it was yours, you have it back*” (Mt 25:24-25). It was not true that this master was a hard and ruthless man, instead he was an extremely generous master. He, on his departure, not only entrusted part of his estate to his servants, but also, on his return, seeing that his money had yielded more money, he did not want his money to back, but, instead, he involved those servants with the management of his entire estate.

So he was a generous person: a false image of God has paralysed the lives of many people. “I was afraid of you, here's what you gave me, I did not invest it for fear of losing it, but here it is”. Therefore, fear of God can paralyse people.

I made this digression to bring the elder son into focus. He is like the religious person who, for fear of God, being submissive to God, does not fulfil his life. And the father continues: “**But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here** – remember, the elder son had said 'your son', but the father says 'your brother' - **was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found**”.

Jesus addresses this parable to those who are scandalised by him for not avoiding sinners, but, on the contrary, for looking for them. The ones who are shocked by his attitude are the same characters that we saw in the beginning: the doctors of the Law, the Pharisees, priests. With his message Jesus reverses the path of the penitent. It used to be: here is a man who sins, then he repents, and, acknowledging his guilt, he offers sacrifices and in the end God forgives him. Jesus, instead, starts with the end: he first forgives and this forgiveness may possibly lead to repentance, i.e. a change in man, a conversion, “new wine into new wineskins”. It is not that the man must first repent to obtain

God's forgiveness, but Jesus says: "God has already forgiven you. Try and ensure that this forgiveness leads to a change in you, a different orientation in your life and, therefore, a radical change in your way of thinking".

Therefore, this parable helps us to understand the relationship between the Father and man and what is our position with sin. Last night we said that it is religion that invents sin. Without religion, no man would ever think that a certain attitude or behaviour is despised by God and, therefore, sinful. We know this because religion tells us so, and religion expresses it through a code, which is the book of the Law. Well, Jesus distances himself from this: for him transgressing the Law does not constitute sin. What do we mean by transgressing the Law? Nobody thinks that carrying an object is a sin that deserves death, if done on a Sabbath. It was the Law that sanctioned that. Nobody thinks that eating a slice of ham is a crime and makes you unclean in the eyes of the Lord. Again, it was the Law that said so.

Therefore, when we say that religion invented sin we mean that religion states that certain things are sinful where no person, using his brain, would think so. They are sinful only because it is written in the Law. However, Jesus distances himself from this concept of sin. For Jesus "sin" is not transgressing the law, but malicious behaviour towards other people. I emphasise: malicious behaviour.

Then sin is not in relation to God, but it is in relation to people. When Jesus lists the twelve forms of behaviour that are sinful, none of these concerns God, religion or acts of cult, but all relate to our attitude towards others. They result from malicious behaviour towards other people. What are these bad and malicious attitudes that hurt others and oneself? Here they are:

1. **Prostitution.** Let us not say: at least here I am not at fault. We must not limit prostitution to activities exercised by some women along back streets. Prostitution means "sell oneself for money, success, or ambition". In the light of this definition, there are a lot of prostitutions in the work, business and, also, family environments. Therefore, prostitution is selling oneself to gain an advantage at the expense of others.
2. **Theft.**
3. **Homicide.**
4. **Adultery.**
5. **Covetousness.** For Jesus, accumulating for oneself, selfishness and greed harm others. One could be the most pious and devout person in the world, but if he is attached to money he is in the category of the impure, i.e. the ones who shut themselves away from God.
6. **Malice.**
7. **Cheating.**
8. **Lasciviousness.**
9. **Envy.**
10. **Slander.**
11. **Pride.**
12. **Stupidity or foolishness.** Last, but not least. It takes the last place because it stands out better: it is easier to remember the first and last item in a list. This is the only sin that I've never heard anybody confessing during my 30 years of administering the

sacrament of reconciliation.

Certainly you may have noticed that in this list, made personally by Jesus (cf. Mk 7:21-22), there is nothing that affects our behaviour towards God.