

24th Sunday of Ordinary Time—Year C

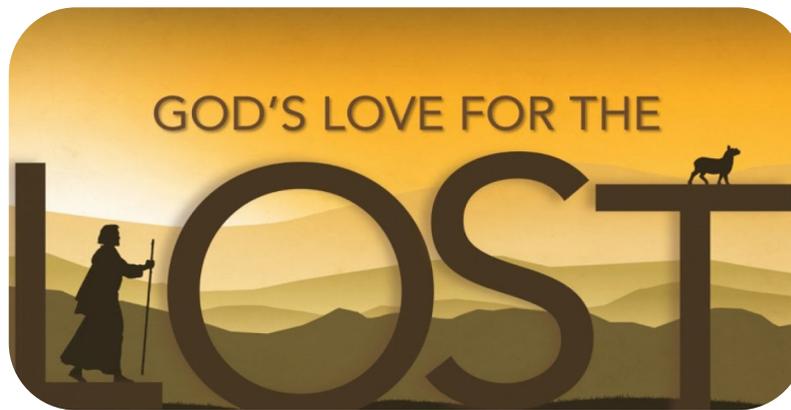
The readings of today are invitations for us to meditate on God's limitless mercy and compassion. Our God is a God who rejoices over the conversion of every sinner.

In the first reading, we see how Moses intercedes with God on behalf of the chosen people. They had strayed from the covenant while Moses was conversing with God on Mount Sinai. Moses makes no attempt to excuse the people's sin. Instead, he relies on God's promise of mercy.

The Gospel to today is all about divine compassion. Jesus enjoyed the hospitality of sinners and tax collectors. When the Pharisees and scribes complained about it, by way of response, Jesus tells three stories: the story of a lost sheep, the story of a lost coin, and the story of a lost son. God is the good shepherd who goes out in search of the lost sheep. He is like the woman who searches for the lost coin until she finds it. He is like the loving father who goes out to welcome his prodigal son. He got his share of the property while the father was still alive—sold it and went away with it—abandoning his obligation to look after his father in his old age. He had treated his father very shamefully. Yet, he goes out to welcome him back. God is overjoyed at the return of every single sinner. He is never tired of forgiving us and helping us to come closer to Him.

Most of us have messed up our life at some time or other. But God is prepared to take us back if we are prepared to turn ourselves around. There is a story of two brothers who were convicted of stealing sheep. Their foreheads were branded with the letters "ST," meaning sheep thief. One of them went away from his town and started his life in a foreign land. But people there began to ask what ST meant. He left that place. He moved from place to place when people asked the meaning of ST. At the end, in frustration he took his own life.

The other brother stayed in his own town and decided to change his life, win back the respect of the people, and build up his reputation.



Years passed, and he became the most helpful, kindest and compassionate person in the whole town. When a stranger saw this man—who was now an old man with the letters ST branded on his forehead—he asked a citizen of the

town what that stood for. He was told, "It stands for saint." Soon enough, the people of the town began to call him a saint. It is possible, then, for a sinner to become a saint.

When we look at the parable of the prodigal son, we see that he started out from his father's house and, after a long and terrible journey, he ended up in his father's house. We all of us start out in our father's house—which is the Church. We are baptized, receive Holy Communion, and get confirmed.

When we are in our father's house, we have everything—our rights, our liberty, our dignity and security—for our spiritual life and for our soul. There are some who, during their journey, leave their father's house, the Church, and go their own way. They go onto all kinds of paths and experience all kinds of things. They rebel against their father who fed them and brought them up. I only wish that all those people would realize their mistake and come back to their father's house, the Church.

The prodigal son returned to his father's house. He realized what he was missing. When we are in the Church, we do not appreciate all the good things we enjoy. It is said, "Freedom is never appreciated until it is lost." The son had reached "rock bottom," taking care of the pigs and eating what pigs ate. It was his self-examination that helped the prodigal son to return.

In the prodigal son, we see the three elements of a perfect contrition: realization, return and confession. We also need to introspect to see where we stand in our relationship with God, and where we are heading in our life. That will help us to trace steps back to God—back to Church. God is always ready to receive us if we are prepared to trace our steps back. If God can receive the prodigal son back, he will take all of us back.