

Hope is never lost (Luke 15)

In chapter 15 of the Gospel of Luke we find three parables of Jesus: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost son. As their titles already point to, in these parables there's something precious which has been lost with great grief. After a while, nevertheless, after careful search or by surprise, grief is being replaced by great joy as this something or someone is found again. Have you ever lost something or someone, who was very precious to you? How did you feel when that happened? Have you tried to recover him or her or the object itself? How did you feel as you couldn't find it? How did you feel when finally you found that person or thing again?



Let's read Luke 15.

A few words about **parables**. Parables were Jesus' favourite way of communicating to the general public. Parables were more than simple handy "illustrations" for better understanding an abstract concept. Parables were true provocations which could make some people really angry as they hit the mark. They were Jesus' way to say things indirectly in order to engage the minds of His listeners in thinking by themselves and discover the truth that they did not see or were not willing to accept. Parables were means for hiding the truth from malicious and prejudiced people and for revealing it to those who had "ears to hear" [cf. Mt. 11:15]. In any case, Jesus was ready to explain the parables to the inner circle of His committed disciples. In Mark 4:34 we read: *"...but without a parable He did not speak to them. And when they were alone, He explained all things to His disciples."*




See the purpose of parables as stated by Jesus Himself in Mark 4:10-12.

In the first three verses of Luke chapter 15, we find the context in which the parables we are considering today were originally spoken, and the reason for presenting them.


Jesus tells them to **Pharisees and scribes** (2a). Within Israel of that time, a Pharisee was a member of a strict Jewish group, holding to the Mosaic Law and their own tradition as absolutely binding. We can see from another story in the Gospels, the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, that these people considered themselves the best of the Jews, the most consistent and serious, and they tended to look down arrogantly on the others who could not live up to their standards. The scribes, at the time of Jesus, were copyists and experts of the law. They had the duty of multiplying copies of the law and of teaching it to others. The titles "scribes" and "lawyers" are in the Gospels interchangeable¹. They were in the time of our Lord the public teachers of the people, and frequently came into collision with Him. Afterwards they showed themselves greatly hostile to the apostles². Some of the scribes, however, were men of a different spirit, and showed themselves friendly to the gospel and its preachers. Thus, Gamaliel advised the Sanhedrin, when the apostles were before them charged with "teaching in this name," to "refrain from these men and let them alone" (Acts 5:34-39).

¹ Matt. 22:35; Mark 12:28; Luke 20:39, etc.

² Acts 4:5; 6:12.


 It could be interesting to look briefly now at the story of the Pharisee and the publican in Luke 18:9-14.

What was **their point of contention** with Jesus here? *The Pharisees and the scribes murmured saying: "This man receives sinners and eats with them?"* (2b). In those times too, many people were living as if God did not exist. They neglected the principles of a moral life prescribed by God's Law and the religious duties which all Jews had to perform. The consistent but legalistic Jews condemned and despised these people, keeping them at a distance in order to let them feel all "the weight" of their sin. As much as the Pagans, these people were considered defiled and defiling all those who were in contact with them. They were "the sinners" *par excellence*, and the faithful was not supposed to have anything to do with them. Jesus, nevertheless, seemed to go and seek these "sinners", enjoying their company. In fact, He often accepted their invitations to come and dine with them in their houses. For the Pharisees and the scribes, this was a scandal which discredited Jesus and His ministry, something which they were all too eager to see. According to the Pharisees and the scribes, Jesus was to be blamed and rejected as a "phoney", a false teacher.

 The New Testament itself seems to recommend to Christians an attitude of separation, non-involvement, from "worldly people". Look briefly at Ephesians 5:3-14. How do you evaluate this advice (or rather command)? What does it mean in practice?

Jesus answers to the contention of those Pharisees and scribes, telling them the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost son. What was its main lesson?

Irrecoverable? Jesus seems to say: "OK, the people you condemn are lost to God. I wouldn't certainly approve or condone what they are and do. I ask you, nevertheless, should these people be considered irrecoverable? They are lost, but shouldn't we go and see if we could 'find' them again? Shouldn't we try to win them back to God? They are precious human creatures. They are not now what they should be in the sight of God but don't you have any compassion for them, wouldn't you like them to be restored? God justly condemns sin, but He is not certainly glad to see them die. God is just, but He has no feelings of revenge: He wants sinners to repent and change their lives. That's why I want to be their friend: not to condone or share their way of living, but in order that they may gradually see the tragedy of their situation, repent, and come back to life. The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost³."


 Jesus' attitude is consistent with what already God had proclaimed in the Old Testament. See Ezekiel 18:21-23⁴.

Hope is never lost. An Italian proverb says: "Finché c'è vita, c'è speranza", that is: "As long as there's life, there's hope", but even more than that, God can raise up to life even those who are (spiritually) dead. Jesus demonstrates that over

³ Luke 19:10.


⁴ „But if a wicked man turns away from all his sins which he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness which he has done he shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?“ (Ez. 18:21-23 RSV).

and over again: people who would have considered hopeless and lost to God, are transformed by God's grace into new creatures. People, who were militant enemies of God, are transformed, by God's grace, in servants of His kingdom. God's glory is being revealed and enhanced in the resurrection of those who, according to human standards, have had in the past no hope or merit.

 The example of the conversion of Paul is exemplary in this. See: 1 Timothy 1:12-17⁵.

Influencing for good. The Pharisees and the scribes did not mix with sinful people because they feared being influenced by them for evil. Yes, even the Pharisees and the scribes should have seen their own sin and the fact that only grace could save them. They could not advance any righteousness of their own in front of God. Why didn't they think that they could also, as committed believers, influence sinners for good? Separation would not have helped them and would only have caused unbelievers to further criticise them for their arrogance and religion itself.

In a secularized society like ours, it's admittedly difficult to engage unbelievers in reflections on God and their spiritual condition. Often, nevertheless, we don't even try to communicate to them personally the Gospel. We say to ourselves: "If those people are not concerned with God, if they do not want to acknowledge Him and rightly submit themselves to His kingdom, if they do not see themselves as sinners in need of a Saviour, Jesus, or refuse to do it, let them fight their own battles! So much the worse for them! I will not go and waste my time with them." Jesus wouldn't have said so. He would have given himself to them, that He might by all means save *some*, as the apostle Paul says: *"To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some"* (1 Cor. 9:22).

 How much are we reaching out to the lost? Do we think it would be useless? What are our excuses not to do it? Are they acceptable?

There are two more levels of reflection in these parables.

Words of comfort. These parables are also words of comfort, an assurance for those that the religious elite considered out of touch by God. There are people, in fact, who are aware they are lost to God, hopelessly lost. They feel themselves so entangled in sin not to have any strength or chance to come out of it and be saved. They might say: "I have no more hope. God condemned me inescapably. I am too bad." Or they might say: "I feel that I am too unworthy and dirty to be able ever to attract God's concern." To these people Jesus, in these parables, says: "No, the mercy of God is unrelenting. If you know you are in such a condition, God is even more ready to take care of you and save you, if only you are willing to change." Jesus said, in fact: *"All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out"* (John 6:37 RSV).

⁵ „I thank him who has given me strength for this, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful by appointing me to his service, though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen." (1 Tim. 1:12-17 RSV)



Did you ever feel unworthy of God's attention?

The Gospel illustrated. These parables, and, in particular, the parable of the prodigal son, has been repeatedly used as an illustration of human condition and God's grace. Every detail of it has been identified as an aspect of the doctrines of grace. For example: the spirit of independence of humankind who do not want God to reign over them. Fleeing from God and wasting His resources, the awareness of our own misery and the desire to come back to God, sensing that God would only condemn us, the surprise of grace etc.



Which elements of the Gospel do you see in the details of this parable?

Paolo Castellina, v. d. m. Thursday, 02 December 2004