

**The 24th Sunday of Year C: God shows us mercy; how should we react?**  
**First Reading: Exodus 32:7-11+13-14: Moses' plea for the sinful people;**  
**Second Reading: 1 Timothy 1:12-17: Paul, an example of God's mercy;**  
**Gospel: Luke 15:1-32: God's mercy: lost sheep & coin; (optional: prodigal son).**

As I e-mail these notes to the Hexham parish office (Thursday, 4pm), there is great national concern for the Queen's health. This adds to the Lent - style feeling of seriousness to all three readings this weekend, and the psalm in between. In the second reading, St Paul writes to his young colleague, Timothy: "Here is a saying that you can rely on...that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners." If this were not true, then we would have no hope! But it has certain uncomfortable implications. How do we feel when offering Christian forgiveness to badly-behaved children (or hardened criminals) when: (1) they are totally in the wrong; (2) they will almost certainly do the same thing again; (3) they have little positively 'nice' about their personality? Yet this is St Paul's view of God's approach to us. This is not just in the gospel: it was found even in the Old Testament.

The first reading (from Exodus 32) takes us to the world of the Israelites in the desert after escaping from Egypt. Wanting something tangible to worship (or, at least to look at), they had fashioned a calf from melted-down gold collected from the people. Bible writers condemned them for this, and the "golden calf" was later used as a symbol for the human 'worship' of material comfort. However, I find the whole thing understandable, if still wrong. A simple people, wandering the deserts north-east of Egypt; they wanted a physical centre for their beliefs and hopes - just as the Egyptians used to have picturesque statues of their own gods. The writer imagines God's fury at their worship of the calf, but he tells us that Moses interceded for them, and so God "did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened". The danger passed.

We should avoid reading too much into Old Testament stories, but I think there are two lessons for us here. Neither will be popular in some quarters! The first is that there is such a thing as sin. It is when we deliberately turn from God's will towards something else, which is often good in itself, and made by God, but not meant to be used in the way we want.. The Hebrews had just been rescued from slavery by two miracles. The death of the Egyptians' first-born had forced Pharaoh to let them go; then, at the Red Sea, the destruction of the Egyptian army had saved them being re-captured. So they knew that this unseen God was on their side. Since those events, they had promised in the Covenant

on Sinai not to have false gods, nor to try to make physical images of God. They knew they had done wrong. The second lesson is that ‘sin’ affects not just the one responsible for it, but also society. By disobeying the rule not to make a physical image of God, they risked making their religion into the same as every other tribe’s religion – a sort of idol-worship, with a primitive moral code.

One of the areas that makes a sin serious (or “mortal”) is what we used to call “grave matter” – acts that are ‘bad’, and with important effects. This was always part of Church teaching, but different cultures used to define “grave” at different levels. For example, southern Europeans would be far more lenient than English-speaking Catholics in saying where the boundary for this “grave matter” (and for serious sin) was to be found. In one way, this made for a more relaxed Catholicism, but in another way, it made people over-tolerant of theft and corruption in society. I know this sounds boring, but the truth must lie in the middle. An over-strict view of sin makes us depressed when we fail; an over-easy view makes us indifferent about doing right or wrong. This affects us all. Modern society tends to be so tolerant that it effectively ignores “sin” altogether. If we go this way ourselves, it means that our consciences become very lax, and the ideas of ‘sin’ and ‘forgiveness’ mean nothing. In turn, that implies that Jesus’ death was pointless – almost a waste of time, according to many people. This is incompatible with any basic Christianity.

The Bible and Church teaching balance the fact of human sinfulness with the mercy shown to us by God. This means that we don’t pretend that sin does not exist (or does not matter), but we believe and trust that our loving God will forgive it – wipe it out - when we ask him with sincerity. This Sunday’s parables, about a shepherd searching for his lost sheep (& finding it), and a woman searching for her lost coin (& finding it). make the point. In both cases, there is relief and delight when the lost thing is found. Jesus implies that this is how his Father “feels” (to risk using too human a phrase) when a morally “lost” human seeks reconciliation with him. One of the happiest moments in a priest’s life is when he facilitates the return of someone to the faith after a long time away. The person gives off a sense of relief and peace – rather like the crew of a storm-damaged ship reaching the safety of a port.

As I said above, this is a Lent-style homily. But the times we live in – war in Ukraine, soaring food & energy bills (hence the government’s action), industrial unrest; the worry over the Queen’s health – mean that we ought to look at life more seriously than we often do. *Fr Jim Dunne.*