

The Father's Forgiveness

The focus of my reflection on the parable of the Prodigal Son in the fifteenth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel is the Father's forgiveness. Christ offers the parable in response to the murmuring of the scribes and Pharisees that, "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Lk 15. 2). The parable describes a father's mercy toward his sons, using vibrant images of human behavior, including patient waiting, compassion in conversion, restoration of lost status, celebratory joy, and forgiveness as self-emptying love. Jesus is defending himself and his treatment of sinners through this parable by implying that the prodigal son's father is His Father. God's ways of mercy are His ways as well, since, in the words of Jesus, "The Father and I are one" (Jn 10. 30).

While mercy is the message of the story, Jesus never employs this word in the narrative. Mercy, however, was an important theological concept to the Jews. Strong's concordance lists 217 references to mercy, mercies, merciful and unmerciful in the Old Testament alone. In describing mercy, the books of the Old Testament use two expressions which are of particular importance: *hesed* and *rahamim*. Beginning our discussion of this parable by defining these two terms will offer insight into our parable and give meaning to the behaviors Jesus used to describe the prodigal son and the father. My source for this insight, and the general direction which my presentation will follow are taken from the work of Pope John Paul II and his 1980 encyclical entitled *Rich in Mercy: On the Mercy of God*. I want to note as well my use of the commentary on the prodigal son parable in the 2006 work of Pope Benedict XVI entitled *Jesus of Nazareth*.

The word *hesed* indicates a profound attitude of "goodness." When this is established between two individuals, they not only wish each other well; they are also faithful to each other because they have made an interior commitment to this goodness; to be unfaithful to this commitment would be to be unfaithful to oneself. In the Old Testament, the word *hesed* is used of the Lord and always in connection with the covenant God established with Israel. This covenant was, on God's part, a gift and a grace for Israel. God had made a commitment to goodness and love and He would respect it. This commitment on God's part ceased to oblige whenever Israel broke the covenant and did not respect its conditions. However, at this point, *hesed*, showed itself as what it was in the beginning, that is, as love that gives, love more powerful than betrayal, grace stronger than sin. Israel could continue to hope and trust in this *hesed*, this mercy of God, since the God of the covenant cannot turn on Himself; He is responsible for his love.

Appealing again to the work of Pope John Paul II, the second important word that the Old Testament uses to describe mercy is *rahamim*. This has a different nuance from that of *hesed*. While *hesed* highlights the marks of fidelity to self and of "responsibility for one's own love," *rahamim* denotes the love of a mother. From the deep and original bond that links a mother to her child there springs a particular relationship to the child, a particular love. This love is completely gratuitous, not merited, and constitutes an interior necessity: an exigency of the heart. Against this psychological background, *rahamim* generates a whole range of feelings, including goodness and tenderness, patience and understanding, and a readiness to forgive.

The Old Testament attributes to the Lord these characteristics when it uses the term *rahamim* in speaking of Him. We read in Isaiah: "Can a woman forget her suckling

child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you" (Is. 49:15). This love, faithful and invincible thanks to the mysterious power of motherhood, is expressed in the Old Testament texts in various ways: as salvation from dangers, especially from enemies; also as forgiveness of sins-of individuals and also of the whole of Israel; and finally in readiness to fulfill the promise and hope, in spite of human infidelity, as we read in Hosea: "I will heal their faithlessness, I will love them freely" (Hos. 14:5). [See footnote 52 in *Dives in Misericordia* from which I have taken, in some places word for word, the explanation of hesed and rahamim in the Old Testament].

Forward now to the time of Jesus and the question why a man of God would sup with sinners. Jesus answers this question through the lens of this dynamic Old Testament understanding of the mystery of mercy in God. Were God to reject the sinner, He would turn on Himself, His goodness, His promise, that which makes Him who He is, His love. Furthermore, the bond of affection, connection, communion of God with His children is greater even than the bond of motherhood. It is a bond of necessity, an exigency of the heart. The heart would die, life would end were this bond extinguished. That is to say, God cannot refuse Himself, who is love. The challenge for Jesus is to explain this truth in a way that His listeners could grasp. This He did in the beautiful parable we call the Prodigal Son.

Jesus states that while the son was still far off, the father saw him. There was a time when the son was beyond the father's sight. We know we cannot hide from God, but we can hide ourselves from seeing God, we can shut Him out, refuse His love. In this sense, the father and son were beyond eye sight of one another, which changed as the son made his way back to his father's house. That the father caught sight of him implies that he was watching for his son's return, which corresponds

with the mercy we have described above, namely, God's mercy is always steadfast in its fidelity to us. It is a fidelity that never wavers, never tires, is ever present, the all-seeing watch of the Lord.

The sight of the son flooded the heart of the father with compassion, Jesus explained, moving the father to run to his son, to embrace him and kiss him. This tender scene of reunion is unexpected and in human terms extravagant. Why should the father have compassion? He was the offended party. However, the longing of the father for his son overcame his rightful claim to punish his son. This is the mercy of God, what the people of Israel hoped for and is now being presented to them; it is love more powerful than betrayal, grace stronger than sin. That the father moved toward the son upon sight of him implies he perceived a change of heart in his son, necessary for mercy, and confirmed in the deeply moving words of sorrow that followed the embrace, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Lk. 15. 21).

Following the son's confession of sin, the father restores him to his former place within the family. The finest robe, the ring and the feast are unmerited gifts to the son, signs that the son now enjoys his former status, expressions of the joy which fills the father's heart. The son had lost this status within the family, and he knew it. He hoped at least to be treated as a slave. But mercy is more than canceling a debt. The mercy of the father goes deeper, into the heart of the son, to restore the son to himself, his true identity, his noble dignity, his status and identity as a child of the father. What matters most is not the squandered money, nor even the offense against the father. What matters most is the man and the ravages against himself that sin effects. This is what the Father must restore if mercy is to achieve its full

effect, of taking one who was dead and bringing him or her back to life, one who was alienated and lost, and helping him or her discover his or her true self again. Here we see the purpose and the power of the Incarnation. God sent his only begotten Son, to reach down into sinful humanity, to root out and destroy what causes death in us. He became one of us, and one with us. “For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5.21) St. Paul explains. This truth about the role of Christ goes beyond the explicit message of the parable, but will become part of the understanding which grows within the Church as she encounters and meditates upon the mystery of the Incarnation. *All that is mine is yours* includes the gift of the Father’s Son. The mercy of God is a person, Jesus Christ, and righteousness, which is the fruit of mercy, is accomplished for the sinner through union in Christ.

Here too we see the tender love of God, akin to but deeper even than the love between a mother and a child. Perhaps you have known the love of a mother, a mother’s look of total joy in seeing you. She sees the good, the possible. She remembers the innocence; she loves what is beautiful in her child. God too see this, but He goes further, because He embraces the sin, the darkness, the alienation, and concentrates His mercy upon these elements so that our goodness can be fully realized and union with Him achieved.

Returning to our parable, the son’s confession is followed by the father’s banquet. It is a lavish and joyful celebration. The son, fully restored, shares in the joy of the father and his family. We can almost hear the laughter of the banquet hall, until sadly, the elder son makes his approach, carrying within himself a cloud of envy and resentment. The father’s compassion is called upon again; he goes out and offers the rationale for conversion. “You are always with me,” he pleads, “and all

that is mine is yours” (Lk. 15. 33). We are not told the effect of this encounter, but rather see revealed in the pleading of the father similar attributes as before: fidelity in his commitment to his son, an expression of a deep bond of love with his son, a desire to share the fruit of this union in joy. But there is something more revealed in the statement of the father, “You are always with me and all that is mine is yours.” The son already possesses what is necessary for union with the father, including the gift of the father’s possessions. If *all that is mine is yours* means more than things, and I believe it does, then what is being described here in this mercy exchange is the father’s action of giving himself for the well-being of his son. The father’s self-sacrificing love for his elder son makes possible their union and the joy of life together.

Forgiveness involves sacrifice. Looking back again at the younger son, we see that sacrifice is part of this story as well. What the younger son took from his father and squandered was not returned. Though the father ran to meet him, embraced and kissed him, he remained without half of his possessions. He forgave the action of his son and assumed the loss of what was due him. And this is mercy as practiced by God: forgiveness and sacrifice.

The Pharisees and scribes instinctively knew that welcoming sinners and befriending them left unresolved the demands of justice violated in the commission of sin. Someone had to pay for these sins, and if not the sinner, then who? When this debt is owed to God, who among us can make the necessary restitution to gain forgiveness? Who can offer the sacrifice for us to make us whole again? Did these thoughts cross their minds as they watched Jesus in the company of sinners? It is all the more wonderful to contemplate the Lord Jesus’ words and work among us when we see Him in light of the events that unfolded on Good Friday. Little did

they know where His life was leading Him. Little did they know how the Father's plan would unfold to provide all things well. The one who supped with Zacheus, who cured the leper, who cast out demons and fed the hungry was the one who would fully express His love for us in the gift of His life for our salvation. He was the sacrifice required for the atonement of sin. The font of the mercy of God would be open to the world through Him, through the pierced side of the crucified Son. "By His stripes we were healed" (Is. 53.5).

Jesus proclaimed the story of the Prodigal Son to answer His critics' complaint that He welcomed sinners and ate with them. The parable reveals the mystery of the Father's mercy, but implicitly, especially when seen in the totality of the sacred texts, reveals the share the Lord Jesus has in the Father's gift of mercy. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14.8) he told Philip. Jesus is the revelation of the Father's love, offered to saints and sinners alike, and the words and works of Jesus give testimony to this truth. He welcomes and eats with sinners to realize the Father's mercy.

To conclude, how might we answer the question: what do we mean when we say the Father's forgiveness?

It is the love of God for the repentant sinner flowing through the self-sacrificing gift of His only begotten Son, which restores a person's humanity and achieves the person's righteousness in God through union in Christ.