

(English translation)

Rocca di Papa, 25 February 1980

Word of Life

“But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.” (Luke 15:32)¹

This passage is found at the end of the parable called The Prodigal Son, which you have certainly heard of. This parable wants to demonstrate and manifest to us the greatness of God's mercy. It closes an entire chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke in which Jesus narrates two other parables to illustrate the same theme.

Do you recall the episode of the lost sheep which the owner, in order to search for it, left the other ninety-nine in the desert? (see Lk 15:4-7)

And remember the story of the lost coin and the joy of the woman who, having found it, calls her friends and neighbours so that they may rejoice with her? (see Lk 15:8-10)

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These are words of invitation which God addresses to you, and to all those who believe, to rejoice with him, to celebrate and to participate in his joy at the return of the sinner who was first lost and then found again. These words in the parable are addressed by the father to his elder son who shared fully in his life. But when this elder son returns home from a hard day's work, he refuses to enter his house where they are celebrating the return of his brother.

The father went out to his faithful son, just as he went out to his lost son, and tries to convince him to join them. But the contrast between the father's sentiments and those of his elder son is evident: on one side, the father with his immeasurable love and great joy that he wanted everyone to share; and on the other, the son full of contempt and jealousy towards his brother whom he no longer recognizes as such. He refers to him, in fact, as "This son of yours who has devoured all your possessions." (Lk 15:30).

The love of the father and his joy at the return of his prodigal son serve to emphasize still more the ill feelings felt by the other son. These ill feelings reveal, however, a cold and - one could say - false relationship between this son and the father. We can deduce that it is work and the fulfilment of his obligations that matter most to this son; he does not love his father as a son should. Rather, we feel that he obeys his father as a hired worker would obey his boss.

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With these words, Jesus points out a dangerous trap that you could also fall into: that of a life lived for the sake of appearances, in search of personal perfection which can lead to judging others as less perfect. As a matter of fact, if you are "attached" to your own perfection, you concentrate on building yourself up without God to the point of being filled with self-admiration. You act like the son who remained at home, who enumerates his merits before his father: "Look, all these years I have served you, and not once did I disobey your orders" (Lk 15:29).

¹ *Word of Life*, March 2001.

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With these words Jesus goes against the Jewish conviction that the entirety of the will of God was contained in the Law which human beings had to live to be pleasing to God. It is not enough to observe the commandments. In the New Testament, Jesus reveals God as Love who takes the first step towards human beings, without taking into account whether they deserve it or not, but with the desire that humans open to establish an authentic relationship of communion with him. Naturally, as one can imagine, the greatest obstacle to God who is Love is precisely the life led by the Pharisees, or of those who accumulate actions and deeds while God wants their hearts.

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With these words, Jesus invites you to extend the same measureless love that the Father has towards those who stray and whom the upright "Christian" judges severely. Jesus calls you not to judge according to your own standards the love that the Father has for each and every person. In inviting his elder son to share his joy for his long-lost son, the Father also asks from you a change of heart: you should welcome as brothers and sisters even those people for whom you nurture sentiments of superiority and even of scorn. This will work in you a true conversion because it will purge you of your conviction that you are "the better." It will save you from religious narrow-mindedness and allows you to welcome the salvation acquired for you by Jesus as a pure gift of God's love.

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