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Thursday's Gospel: I have come to call sinners

Gospel for Thursday in the 31st Week of Ordinary Time, and commentary.

Gospel (*Lk 15:1-10*)

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the

wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Commentary

One of the things that stands out most clearly in Jesus' public life is that none of those who were considered sinners felt rejected by our Lord. Luke tells us that "the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him." With his welcoming and merciful heart, Jesus was eager to speak with all of them. He encouraged them to take their relationship with God seriously, because welcoming them and showing mercy does not imply they should close their eyes to the need to reject sin and do good. Jesus' welcome was, at the same time, a self-giving for them: "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (*Rom 5:8*). It is the renewal of God's first love: "We love, because he first loved us" (*1 Jn 4:19*).

Those tax collectors and sinners realized that Jesus was seeking and calling them. Our Lord prayed at the Last Supper: “While I was with them, I protected in your name those whom you have given me. I guarded them” (*Jn 17:12*). And he did so like the shepherd who goes out to look for the sheep: because we have been entrusted to him by the Father, and he knows the calling we have received and loves us with divine love, and wants no one to be lost. And he asks us to have the same love when he appoints us as his emissaries: “he sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to come” (*Lk 10:1*). Jesus wants those who follow him to share in the love in his own heart.

The examples our Lord gives are a challenge to a human outlook. It is not easy for a shepherd to abandon an entire flock to look for a single

sheep if this will involve risk to the others. But Jesus the Good Shepherd does this. That is how strong his concern is for each and every person. His eagerness to attract us to the Father is like that of a woman who has lost the coin needed for the daily support of her family. Her effort in searching for it is proportional to her love for her family members. Jesus encourages us to grow in true love for our neighbors, love also for their eternal life. This love will bear fruit in prayer, inventiveness and determination to help each other identify what distances us from God and grow in our desire to have a clean heart.