

Historic Commentary



(The 17th Sunday of Trinitytide - Year C)

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Luke 15:1-10

(Selections from Church Fathers and John Calvin)

*Compiled by the Rev. Eric Dirksen.

Cyril of Alexandria: Tell me, O Pharisee, why do you grumble because Christ did not scorn to be with publicans and sinners, but purposely provided for them this means of salvation? To save people, he yielded himself to emptiness, became like us, and clothed himself in human poverty

Ambrose: St. Luke did not idly present three parables in a row. By the parables of the sheep that strayed and was found, the coin which was lost and was found, and the son who was dead and came to life, we may cure our wounds, being encouraged by a threefold remedy. "A threefold cord will not be broken." Who are the father, the shepherd and the woman? They are God the Father, Christ and the church. Christ carries you on his body, he who took your sins on himself. The church seeks, and the Father receives. The shepherd carries. The mother searches. The father clothes. First mercy comes, then intercession, and third reconciliation. Each complements the other. The Savior rescues, the church intercedes, and the Creator reconciles. The mercy of the divine act is the same, but the grace differs according to our merits. The weary sheep is recalled by the shepherd, the coin which was lost is found, the son retraces his steps to his father and returns, guilty of error but totally repentant.

Tertullian: There is a breadth of patience in our Lord's parables, the patience of the shepherd that makes him seek and find the straying sheep. Impatience would readily take no account of a single sheep, but patience undertakes the wearisome search. He carries it on his shoulders as a patient bearer of a forsaken sinner. In the case of the prodigal son, it is the patience of his father that welcomes, clothes, feeds and finds an excuse for him in the face of the impatience of his angry brother. The one who perished is rescued, because he embraced repentance. Repentance is not wasted because it meets up with patience!

Ambrose: Let us rejoice that the sheep that had strayed in Adam is lifted on Christ. The shoulders of Christ are the arms of the cross. There, I laid down my sins. I rested on the neck of that noble yoke. The sheep is one in kind, not in appearance, because "we are all

one body” but many members. It is written, “You are the body of Christ, and members individually.” “The Son of man came to seek and save what was lost.” He sought all, because “as in Adam all men die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.”

Basil the Great: Leaving those that have not strayed, the good Shepherd seeks you. If you will surrender yourself, he will not hold back. In his kindness, he will lift you up on his shoulders, rejoicing that he has found his sheep that was lost. The Father stands and awaits your return from your wandering. Only turn to him, and while you are still afar off, he will run and embrace your neck. With loving embraces, he will enfold you, now cleansed by your repentance.... He says, “Truly I say to you that there is joy in heaven before God over one sinner who repents.” If any one of those who seem to stand will bring a charge that you have been quickly received, the good Father himself will answer for you. He will say, “It is fitting that we should celebrate and be glad, for this my daughter was dead and is come to life again. She was lost and is found.”

Ambrose: The price of the soul is faith. Faith is the lost drachma that the woman in the Gospel seeks diligently. We read that she lit a candle and swept her house. After finding it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, inviting them to rejoice with her because she has found the drachma that she had lost. The damage to the soul is great if one has lost the faith or the grace that he has gained for himself at the price of faith. Light your lamp. “Your lamp is your eye,” that is, the interior eye of the soul. Light the lamp that feeds on the oil of the spirit and shines throughout your whole house. Search for the drachma, the redemption of your soul. If a person loses this, he is troubled, and if he finds it, he rejoices.

Ambrose: The shepherd is rich. We are his hundredth portion. He has innumerable flocks of angels, of archangels, of dominions, of powers, of thrones, of the others whom he left on the mountains. Since these are rational, they fittingly rejoice in the salvation of people. Although this also may be of benefit as an incentive to honesty, if each believes that his conversion would be pleasing to the hosts of angels, whose protection is to be sought and whose displeasure feared. Be a source of joy to the angels. May they rejoice in your return.

Ambrose: The woman did not idly rejoice to find her coin. The coin, having the image of the emperor, is not ordinary. The image of the King is the register of the church. We are sheep. Let us pray that he would be pleased to place us beside the water of rest. We are sheep. Let us seek pastures. We are coins. Let us have a price. We are sons. Let us hurry to the Father. Let us not fear because we have squandered the inheritance of spiritual dignity that we received on earthly pleasures. Since the Father conferred on the Son the treasure that he had, the wealth of faith is never made void. Although he has given all, he possesses all and does not lose what he has bestowed. Do not fear that perhaps he will not receive you, for the Lord has no pleasure in the destruction of the living. Already meeting you on the way, he falls on your neck, “for the Lord sets the fallen right.” He will give you a kiss, that is, the pledge of piety and love. He will order the robe, ring and the shoes to be brought. You still dread harshness, but he has restored dignity. You are terrified of

punishment, but he offers a kiss. You fear reproach, but he prepares a banquet. Let us now discuss the actual parable.

John Calvin: For, though they happen sometimes to wander, yet as they are sheep over which God has appointed his Son to be shepherd, so far are we from having a right to chase or drive them away roughly, that we ought to gather them from their wanderings; for the object of the discourse is to lead us to beware of losing what God wishes to be saved. The narrative of Luke presents to us a somewhat different object. It is, that the whole human race belongs to God, and that therefore we ought to gather those that have gone astray, and that we ought to rejoice as much, when they that are lost return to the path of duty, as a man would do who, beyond his expectation, recovered something the loss of which had grieved him.

Luke 15:10. There will be joy in the presence of the angels. If angels mutually rejoice with each other in heaven, when they see that what had wandered is restored to the fold, we too, who have the same cause in common with them, ought to be partakers of the same joy. But how does he say that the repentance of one ungodly man yields greater joy than the perseverance of many righteous men to angels, whose highest delight is in a continued and uninterrupted course of righteousness? I reply, though it would be more agreeable to the wishes of angels (as it is also more desirable) that men should always remain in perfect integrity, yet as in the deliverance of a sinner, who had been already devoted to destruction, and had been cut off as a rotten member from the body, the mercy of God shines more brightly, he attributes to angels, after the manner of men, a greater joy arising out of an unexpected good.

Over one repenting sinner. The word repentance is specially limited to the conversion of those who, having altogether turned aside from God, rise as it were from death to life; for otherwise the exercise of repentance ought to be uninterrupted throughout our whole life, and no man is exempted from this necessity, since every one is reminded by his imperfections that he ought to aim at daily progress. But it is one thing, when a man, who has already entered upon the right course, though he stumble, or fall, or even go astray, endeavors to reach the goal; and another thing, when a man leaves a road which was entirely wrong, or only starts in the right course. Those who have already begun to regulate their life by the standard of the divine law, do not need that kind of repentance which consists in beginning to lead a holy and pious life, though they must groan under the infirmities of the flesh, and labor to correct them.