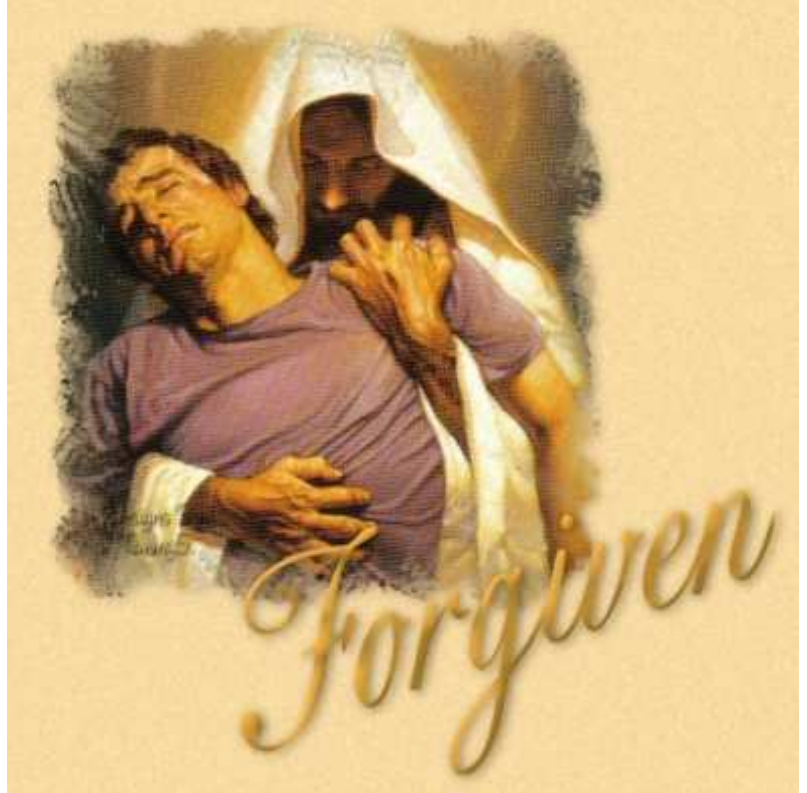


All three readings today speak of forgiveness. Our first reading is from the book of Exodus which is all about God freeing his people from the slavery of Egypt. Egypt representing slavery to sin. Egypt was the most prosperous country of the Ancient World and represents also the materialism that enslaves. The People of Israel migrated to this land of plenty in the midst of a famine. In Egypt all their material needs were met. There they prospered and grew, but yet gradually the land of abundance turned into the land of slavery. Were the Hebrews physically enslaved or enslaved by the paganism and the materialism that surrounded them? Maybe both, in any case God decided to free his people from Egypt through the purifying journey of the desert to a Promised Land.



They should have rejoiced but they soon rebelled. Like the addict recovering from a drug, they wanted to return. They yearned for the onions and the flesh pots of Egypt (Nu 11:5). In the desert they drifted from their purpose and erected a Golden Calf (Ex 32). Once more God forgave them. Their story resembles our spiritual struggle, always returning to what enslaves us than seeking forgiveness and return.

In the second reading, Paul tells us that if there was hope for him, there is hope for all of us. He describes himself as the foremost sinner, a **“blasphemer and a persecutor and arrogant”** (1 Tim 1: 13), yet Christ reached out for him and made him the greatest of his Apostles. From Christ, Paul received strength, love and mercy.

As poignant as these two examples are, it is the 15 chapter of Luke that shows the extreme, the unreasonableness of God’s love and forgiveness.

The way he sets the scene is most interesting. According to Luke, Jesus scandalized the religious authorities of his time by the company he kept: **“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them”** (Lk 15:2). Today he would still scandalize most of us by his conduct. We would want to hear justification for his actions. Which pastor after all would survive if he constantly hung around people we consider low-lives, dishonest business people or prostitutes? None! Jesus’ excuse was that, **“It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick”** (Lk 5:31). How long would such an excuse hold water if our local press got a hold of it? There is no way around it, Jesus was and still is shocking by the boldness of his actions.

As if he had read his accusers' minds, Jesus responded to their objections with three parables in which he compares God to a shepherd, to a woman and to a father. All three persons had experienced a lost, one a sheep, another a coin and third a son. In all three cases the character is excessive in his or her reaction. They are not reasonable. They go too far.

What sense would it make for a shepherd to abandon ninety-nine sheep to seek for a single lost one? Jesus asks: **“What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it?”** It seems to me that the answer should be **“Nobody.”** It would be irresponsible; it would not be worth the risk. Would not the reasonable response be to say, **“I’ll cut my lost and leave this one to the wolves.”**

The woman is as unreasonable as the shepherd. She has nine silver coins left but she wastes the whole day searching for the lost one. After all, time is money. When she finds it, she throws a party, probably spending most of the other coins. It is extravagant and irresponsible.

As for the third parable, who amongst us does not feel sympathy for the older brother, the good son who stayed home, never disobeyed his father nor asked for anything extra? It’s just not fair! Our sense of justice is offended. And this is the crux of the matter; we have here the two faces of religion, the religion of rules and the religion of relationships.

The older brother represents that religion of rules which is probably where most of us are. His younger brother’s conversion is less important than his need to see him pay for his sins. If we start forgiving everyone, can you imagine what would happen? No one needs to worry about that however; it hasn’t happened in two thousand years and there is not much risk it will catch on now. Few have taken that teaching seriously and it might even be getting worse as we speak.

Which politician, at least in the United States, would get elected if he or she ran on a theme of forgiving our enemies? Of doing good to those who persecute us or of blessing those who curse us? Add to that reducing prison sentences rather than lengthening them, abolishing the death penalty and making peace with our enemies. All irresponsible and unreasonable alternatives. That is the problem with God, he’s not reasonable, for God is love.

I’ve always liked C.K. Chesterton’s answer to George Bernard Shaw who had written that **“Christianity had failed.”** Chesterton’s come back was **“Christianity has not failed; it has never really been tried.”**

As I will pray shortly in the preface to the II Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation: **“By your Spirit you move human hearts that enemies may speak to each other again, adversaries join hands, and peoples seek to meet together. By the working of your power it comes about, O Lord, that hatred is overcome by love, revenge gives way to forgiveness, and discord is changed to mutual respect.”** It might not be reasonable but in the end it is the only thing that works.