

NOVEMBER 7 2024 MSGR. ROBERT NUSCA

Today's Gospel is taken from the so-called "travel section" of Luke's Gospel, where he describes our Lord's journey up to Jerusalem. For it is there that the key events of our salvation will unfold—from the passion and death of our Lord to his resurrection, his ascension, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. As our Lord journeys together with his disciples, we find him teaching in parables. I think that several things emerge for our reflection here.

First of all, as I've said on other occasions, in these parables, or teaching stories, we find Jesus speaking of weeds and of wheat, of good soil and of bad, of the treasure hidden in a field, the pearl of great price, and of lost sheep, as we've heard today. Here the language for the parables is drawn from the everyday world of his audience. We should note that the social perspective, if we can call it that, of the parables is very much that of the poor of our Lord's time. Commentators observe that the parables offer a view of life in our Lord's time, as seen through the eyes of a servant, looking out through a door onto the world of the master.

Beneath the quaint language of the parables, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that Jesus is actually unleashing a rather scathing critique aimed at the attitudes of the elites of his time—the religious, social, and political elites. Ultimately, beneath the simple language of the parables, our Lord offers us a profound and compelling vision of God's presence and of God's transforming power at the heart of everyday life. In the world of the parables, God is very near to us. God wants to show us his love and mercy. He wants to share the powerful, transforming graces that are ours through the life of faith and through the life of holiness, as the lives of the saints show us. What helps give the parables their universal appeal is precisely this vision of God's presence and graces at work in our everyday life.

Secondly, as we focus on the parables in today's Gospel, Jesus speaks to us of people who have lost something. The shepherd goes out in search

of the lost sheep, the woman in search of her lost coin. In tomorrow's Gospel, Jesus will go on to speak of the father whose prodigal son was lost morally and spiritually to a life of excess. In each case, we see how the loss is accompanied by the experience of a genuine crisis. We see the great efforts made by the people described to recover what was lost, to go out and find it. In each case, our Lord recounts the joy of finding what was lost, and the great rejoicing of those who share in the discovery.

Ultimately, Jesus invites us to reflect on the joy in heaven over the one sinner who repents. Commentators observe that Jesus shows us how heaven seeks after the lost of the earth and how heaven rejoices when what was lost is now found. These parables about God's love, mercy, and forgiveness, as well as the joy over even one repentant sinner, have a great deal to say to us in our post-modern world. Today we live in an era that has witnessed the loss of the sense of the existence of God in the developed West. Theologians speak of the "eclipse of God." Along with this eclipse, we are witnessing the eclipse of the sense of the greatness of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God. As one philosopher says, "Where there is not God, there is no humanity either."

Church documents speak of the crisis of the sense of sin in our time. Pope John Paul speaks of the obscuring of the moral and religious conscience and the lessening of the sense of sin. He speaks of the distortion of the concept of repentance and the lack of effort to live an authentically Christian life. Decades earlier, Pope Pius XII observed that "the sin of the century is the loss of the sense of sin." Catholic philosopher Etienne Gilson adds, "The real trouble in our time is not the multiplication of sinners, but the disappearance of sin." For the voice of God no longer resounds within the depths of the conscience of the human person.

When the shepherd and the woman in today's Gospel realized that they'd lost something, they set out immediately in search of it. But in our post-

modern, post-human era, how many people recognize what's been lost? Ours is a time when, for many people, there is no God, a time when humanity no longer strives to live in accord with the God-image within us. We have witnessed a profound change, indeed a distortion, in our basic understanding of mercy, as in the case of euthanasia, now referred to as "medical assistance" in dying.

Finally, as Advent approaches, we're called once more to live our faith authentically and deeply, in all its dimensions. We're called to draw closer to God, the God of love, the God of mercy. Saint Gregory of Nyssa warns us of the importance of keeping our lamps always lit and having our house swept clean. In this way, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we may safeguard our own coin, along with the image of God that is within us. Saint Gregory warns of the darkening and obscuring of the divine image within our hearts.

Today's parables have a happy ending. We should always remember that the parables speak to us, again very powerfully, of the newness of life that God wants to bring about in Christ, in us. This newness of life that God wants to give humanity comes through his love and mercy. The parables speak about the marvelous offer of God's grace, even in the midst of the sinfulness and imperfection surrounding us every day. They speak of a newness, which is ultimately a share in the transforming power of Christ himself, as the lives of the saints show us.

And so, we see the great importance of drawing close to the wellsprings of God's mercy—through the sacrament of reconciliation, the Eucharist, Eucharistic adoration, the life of prayer, and the life of the Spirit. Today's Gospel also reminds us of the Church's ministry of mercy. Saint Pope John Paul II comments that each of us is called to be rich in mercy towards others, just as God is. For the Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy, "the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer," and when she brings people close to the sources of God's mercy, of which she is the trustee and dispenser.

Let us extend God's mercy to others—to the lost, the lonely, the abandoned of society, the poor, and the hungry—all living on the margins or peripheries of society. These are the very people for whom Christ himself showed special love and concern. Augustine speaks of the healing power of mercy. In addition to the corporal works of mercy, let us always exercise the spiritual works of mercy, as we console, instruct, advise, and comfort those in need of our support and attention. In our dealings with others, we should always remember our Lord's own example of patience and forbearance with his disciples.