

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
(Sunday In The Octave Of The Sacred Heart Of Jesus)
(Luke 15: 1-10)

(Poem Vol. 2, pp. 493, 499-501, 541-2, 339-43;
Gospel Vol. 4, pp. 32, 39-42, 91-2, Vol. 3, pp. 338-42)

(The first of the two parables in today's Gospel is The Lost Sheep. The story begins in Capernaum, where Jesus tells Martha, sister of the ill-famed Mary Magdalene, to be gentle and forgiving to her sister, who is close to giving up her life of debauchery. He says:)

'She cannot even bear [the thought of] your caressing, sisterly eyes, watching her confess to her Saviour. All her energy is employed and consumed in holding the seven-fold demon by the throat. For all the rest, she is defenceless and unclothed. But I will reclothe her, and fortify her. Go in peace, Martha. And tomorrow, tell her tactfully that I shall be speaking near the torrent of the Fountain, here in Capernaum, after vesper.'...

(In Capernaum, ...)

Jesus is standing on the edge of the tree-covered embankment of a little torrent, addressing a large crowd spread out in a field where the corn has been cut... It is evening. Night is falling, but the moon is already rising. Flocks of sheep are going back to the folds, and the sound of cattle-bells mingles with the loud chirping of crickets and the high-pitched drone of cicadas.

Jesus takes the passing flocks as a starting point. He says: 'Your Heavenly Father is like an anxious shepherd. What does a good shepherd do? He looks for good pastures for his sheep, where there is no hemlock or other poisonous herbs, but where there is plenty of sweet clover, aromatic mint, and bitter but wholesome chicory...

The good shepherd watches his sheep, one by one. He cures them when they are sick, and if they get hurt, he dresses their wounds. He reproaches the sheep that might be sick because they are too greedy for food, and he calls to a different place the ones that might be harmed (by staying too long in a damp spot or in the sunshine). And if one is unwilling to eat, he looks for bitter aromatic herbs, suitable to whet its appetite. And he feeds it with his own hands, speaking to it as he would to a friend. That is what the good Father Who is in Heaven does - with His children who are wandering on the earth. His love is the staff that gathers them together, His voice is their guide, His Law is His pasture, Heaven is His fold.

But one of his sheep leaves him. How fond of it he was! It was young, pure, white, like a cloud in an April sky. The shepherd used to look at it with so much love, thinking of how much good he could do for it, and how much love he could receive from it. And it strays.

A tempter passes on the road that runs along the pasture. He doesn't wear a plain jacket, but has on a many-coloured robe. He doesn't have a leather belt with hatchet and knife hanging from it, but wears a golden belt, from which little bells hang, as sweet-sounding as the singing of a nightingale, like phials of inebriating scents...

The shepherd carries a staff as good shepherds do, to gather the sheep together and defend them. And should his staff not be sufficient, he is ready to defend them with his hatchet and knife, and even with his life.

But the tempter, passing by, is holding in his hands an incense-holder, sparkling with gems, with smoke arising from it. It is stench and scent at the same time, and it bewilders, just as the sparkling of the fake jewels dazzles. He passes by, singing, and drops handfuls of salt, which shines on the dark road... Ninety-nine sheep look, and remain where they are. The one hundredth - the youngest and dearest one - makes a leap. and disappears behind the tempter. The shepherd calls it. But it does not come back. It runs faster than the wind, to join the tempter who has just gone by. And to sustain itself while running, it tastes some of the salt which, as soon as it is swallowed, causes a strange burning frenzy. So the poor sheep craves for cool water in the deep green shades of forests. And following the tempter, it goes into the forests, and it climbs, and descends, and falls... once, twice, three times. Each time it feels the slimy

embrace of reptiles around its neck. Being thirsty, it drinks foul water; and when it is hungry, it eats herbs shining with revolting slobber.

In the meantime, what does the good shepherd do? He leaves the ninety-nine faithful ones in a safe place, he sets out, and he doesn't stop until he finds traces of the lost sheep. But the sheep doesn't come back to him, although he calls it in a loud voice, begging the wind to carry his call...

Then, he sees it from a distance, intoxicated in the coils of reptiles. It is so intoxicated, it does not feel nostalgia for the man who loves it. On the contrary, it mocks him. He is aware that it is guilty of entering - like a thief - the abode of other people. It is so guilty that it dare not look at him... And yet, the good shepherd doesn't become tired... He goes on looking for it all the time, following its traces, and weeping when he loses them. There are strips of fleece; traces of its soul; traces of blood; various crimes; filth; and proofs of its lust. But he goes on and reaches it.

Ah! I found you, my beloved one. I reached you at last! How far have I walked for you, to take you back to the fold. Do not bend your dejected head. Your sin is buried in my heart. Nobody will know about it except me, and I love you. I will defend you from the criticism of other people, I will shield you with my body, to protect you against the stones of accusers. Come.

Are you wounded? Oh! let me see your wounds. I know them. But I want you to show them to me, with the confidence you had when you were pure, and when you looked at me - your shepherd and your God - with innocent eyes. There they are. They all have the same name. How deep they are! Who inflicted these very deep ones in the depth of your heart? It was the Tempter, I know. It is he - who has neither staff nor hatchet - but he strikes more deeply with his poisonous bite. And after him, the false jewels of his incense-holder strike: the ones that seduced you by sparkling... and they were hellish sulphur brought up to daylight to burn your heart. Look how many wounds! How much torn fleece, how much blood, how much bramble. O my poor little disappointed soul! But tell me: if I forgive you, will you still love me? Tell me: if I stretch out my arms to you, will you come to them? Tell me: do you thirst for good love? Well come and be born again. Come back to the holy pastures. Weep. Your tears and mine will wash away the traces of your sin. And in order to nourish you - because you are worn out by the evil which has burnt you - I open my chest and my veins, and I say to you: "Feed on them, and live!"

Come here so that I can take you in my arms. We will walk faster to the safe holy pastures. You will forget everything about this miserable hour. And your ninety-nine good sisters will rejoice at your return, because I tell you - my little lost sheep for which I have searched from far away, and which I reached and saved - I tell you: there is more rejoicing among the good, for one who was lost and has been found, than for ninety-nine just ones, who never left the fold.'

Jesus has never turned around to look at the road behind Him, and on which Mary of Magdala has arrived in the dim light of the evening. She is most elegant - but at least she is dressed - and she is wearing a dark veil, which conceals her features and figure. And when Jesus continues His speech from the words: 'I found you, my beloved one', Mary hides her hands under her veil and weeps, softly and continuously.

People cannot see her, because she is on this side of the embankment, which runs along the road. Only the moon - now high in the sky - and Jesus' spirit, can see her...

(At another time, after Mary Magdalene's conversion, and in her presence among some startled people of Magdala, Jesus tells another parable, while the Magdalene is holding the baby of an astonished woman in her arms...)

'A woman had ten drachmas in her purse. She made a movement, and the purse fell from her breast; it opened, and the coins rolled on the floor. She picked them up with the help of her next door neighbours who were with her, and she counted them. But there were only nine. The tenth could not be found. As it was almost evening and it was getting dark, the woman lit a lamp, placed it on the floor, and she began to sweep the floor with a broom, to see whether

it had rolled far from the spot where it had fallen. But the drachma could not be found. Her friends left her, as they were tired of searching for it.

The woman then shifted a heavy chest and a cabinet, and she removed amphoras and pitchers from a recess in the wall. But the drachma could not be found. She then began to crawl on all fours and searched in the sweepings, piled up against the door, in case the drachma had rolled out of the house and become mixed with vegetable refuse.

At last she found the drachma, which was soiled and almost buried under the sweepings. The jubilant woman picked it up, washed it, and dried it. It was now more beautiful than before. She called her neighbours again at the top of her voice, showed it to them, and said to them: "Here you are! See? You advised me not to bother any more. But I insisted, and I found the lost drachma. So rejoice with me, because I have not suffered the loss of one of my treasures". Then Jesus says: 'Your Master, and His apostles as well, behave like the woman of the parable. He knows that a movement may cause a treasure to fall. Every soul is a treasure. And Satan - who hates God - provokes false movements to make poor souls fall.

There are some souls who, when they fall, stop near the purse. That is, they do not go too far from the Law of God, Who gathers them and protects them by means of His commandments. Some souls go further away, that is, further away from God and His Law.

Some, finally, roll as far as the sweepings, dirt and mud. And they would end up by burning in the eternal fire, as rubbish is burnt in suitable places.

The Master knows all this, and He looks untiringly for lost coins. He looks for them everywhere, with love. They are His treasures. He never tires, and He loathes nothing. He rummages, searches, shifts, sweeps - until He finds what He is looking for. And once He has found it, He washes the recovered souls with His forgiveness. And then He calls all His friends - the whole of Paradise, and all the good people of the earth - and He says to them: "Rejoice with Me, because I have found what was lost. It is now more beautiful than beforehand, because My forgiveness has made it new."...

I solemnly tell you, that there is nothing more beautiful than tears of repentance. I solemnly tell you, that it is only demons who cannot rejoice over such a conversion, which is a triumph of God. And I tell you, that the way a man welcomes the conversion of a sinner, is the measure of his own goodness, and of his union with God.

Peace be with you.'

The crowds understand the lesson and look at the Magdalene, who has come to sit on the threshold, holding the baby in her arms...