

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the Gospel this weekend, Jesus tells three parables about God's love and mercy. All three are familiar to us, but it is always good to be reminded again.

The first is the parable of the lost sheep – Jesus speaks about how the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep to go in search of the one lost sheep. Not only does he search for it, when he finds it, the shepherd *carries* the sheep home. He doesn't just guide it home, but takes the sheep upon his own shoulders to carry it home. The second parable is about the lost coin. The woman lights a lamp, sweeps the house, searching and searching. The third parable is the famous "Prodigal Son" story. The father keeps watch for his son. When his wayward son returns, the father *runs* out to meet him, and immediately restores him to his role as "son" in the house. When the older son refuses to come in, the father goes out to speak with him. With each of these parables, there is great rejoicing at finding what was lost.

And so does God respond to us. He rejoices when we come home. He calls all heaven to rejoice when a sinner repents – turns away from sin.

Note, too, that the shepherd, the woman and the father go out of themselves, spending themselves to find what was lost. The shepherd endangers himself by going out into the wilderness to find the lost sheep. The woman expends a lot of energy searching for the lost coin. The father literally runs to meet the younger son, and later leaves the party to go out to plead with the older son.

In these parables, Jesus puts the lie to the understanding that we have to go out in search of God. God Himself, Jesus tells us, comes in search for us. While most religions in the world may be about humanity's search for the divine, Christianity – Jesus tells us – is about the endless pursuit of God for humanity. We are lost. We run from God. We too often have our priorities out of whack, as we prefer the *immediate* to the *lasting reward*. Yet God seeks us out. He is relentless in chasing us! We have but to *let God* take us upon His shoulders and carry us home. We have but to let Him shine His light on us and find us. We have but to turn back to Him, and let Him run out and embrace us. We have but to let Him call us back into the house. God is in pursuit of us ... because He is head-over-heels in love with us.

Francis Thompson (1859-1907) wrote a famous poem called "The Hound of Heaven." I encourage everyone to read it (despite its length). In this poem, the narrator speaks about how he has fled from almighty God – over and over seeking to avoid Him: "I fled Him down the nights and down the days;/ I fled Him, down the arches of the years..." With each new idea, Thompson shows how he ran from God, but how he was never satisfied. God continues to pursue him ("those strong Feet that followed... with unhurrying chase,/And unperturbèd pace"):

They beat—and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—

‘All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.’

At the end of each section, the Voice emphasizes again that nothing will satisfy if it is not of God, everything will ultimately betray us if it doesn't lead to God:

‘Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me.’...

‘Lo! Naught contents thee, who content'st not Me!’...

‘Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fliest Me!’

Thompson recognizes how we so easily we want to run from God. We buy the *lie* that God wants us miserable, or that to follow Him is to give up all pleasure and happiness. This is not the case at all. Rather, God knows that when we settle for "fleeting things," we are betrayed, unsheltered, discontent, and empty. It is when we allow God to chase us down, to catch us, to hold us in His arms of love and mercy, to bring us home rejoicing – then, and only then, do we find safety, satisfaction, happiness, and fulfilment.

I pray that we may allow the Hound of Heaven, the Good Shepherd, the Loving Father to run after us, catch us, and bring us back home to His Heart!