

15 September 2013

In today's first reading from the book of Exodus, we have a classic case in the bible of something which started as a nice idea going horribly wrong. Moses was called by God to lead the people out of Egypt, to set God's people free. Moses was very reluctant to undertake this task and considered himself unworthy and unprepared for such a responsibility. His reluctance increased even more. But as we find so often in the bible, God persisted and expressed his confidence that Moses was the perfect candidate for the task. And that's when things turn to disaster. The chosen people of God who had been set free from the slavery and oppression of Egypt, the same people who sing a great song of praise for what God had done through Moses, who promised their undying faith and loyalty to God, then do what? They make for themselves a calf of molten metal and they bow down and worship the calf. And I remember very clearly one of the few scripture lessons from the Old Testament that I recall from my seminary days; the people commit the greatest sin in the bible. They forget the God who set them free. They basically say to God, 'You, we don't believe in anymore. Israel, here is your God, the calf of molten metal. Now bow down and worship.'

And what is the consequence of this forgetting? The bible gives us a very valuable lesson. The people once set free are now enslaved again by their own doing. Having forgotten and ignored the God who set them free, they now tie their lives and their destiny to a calf made of molten metal. Rather than bringing life, this idolatry brings them death. Rather than bringing freedom, this idolatry brings them slavery. Rather than bringing hope, this idolatry brings despair. And what is the reaction of God? Justifiably he is well within his rights to punish his people for such an offensive action. But Moses pleads with God – 'Lord, this is your chosen people whom you set free. Remember the promise you made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Moses was successful. The Lord remembered this promise and he relented. Notice the pattern. God remembered where the people forgot. The people's forgetting brought death. God's remembering brings forth life and hope.

The Lord relented. He withheld his anger and did not bring upon the people the disaster he had promised. This is the God who is rich in mercy. This is another pattern in the bible which we see so often – the complete upturning of our expectations. We see it in today's Gospel. There is joy for God not in the 99 sheep left behind but in the one lost sheep which is found. The 99 are probably safe and secure; the lost one is perhaps weak and vulnerable. Or the woman who rejoices at finding the lost coin, going to great trouble to sweep out the house and light a lamp. And, having found the lost coin, she calls her friends and neighbours to rejoice in this good news.

Today's readings make it abundantly clear that in God we find joy and mercy, that our expectations are completely upended, and that the little things really make all the difference. Joy and mercy are themes that Pope Francis repeats on a daily basis – joy in our faith, great mercy found in God. An internet article has nicknamed him, 'the cold-call Pope'. He just picks up the phone and rings people who have written to him. A young Italian man who had suffered great tragedy in his family wrote to Pope Francis saying that his faith was shaky and that he had doubts about what God was doing in his life. Then there is a phone call, 'Michele, it's Pope Francis. I am ringing to assure you that God loves you and that he is close to you even in these dark, dark days of your life. And I want to tell you that I am praying for you and your family and remembering your intentions in my Masses'. Michele bursts into tears; in his despair, this young man found joy and mercy when his spirit was crushed and he could not see the way forward. But the pope asked him to remember that God is with us even in the most challenging times of our lives.

As we gather to celebrate the Eucharist and to hear the word of God, we are nourished and set free. God calls us to celebrate in faith and joy, even when there are dark moments of our lives. When we are down, he lifts us up. When we are lost, he brings us home. When we turn away from him, God fills our lives with joy and mercy; he loves us and sets us free.