

# BIBLICAL RESOURCES

**Exodus 32:7-11,13-14; Psalm 51 (50); 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-32**

## His father saw him and was filled with compassion!

Luke 15:1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Luke 15:3 So he told them this parable: 4 “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ 7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (lit. *metanoia*).

Luke 15:8 “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ 10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Luke 15:11 Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him any-

thing. 17 But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

Luke 15:25 “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ 31 Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was

### Thought for the day

Happiness in believing is possibly out of fashion and even out of sync with the times. And yet, engagement with the Good News should surely lead to a profound happiness, even exuberance. Just because we don’t feel it all the time doesn’t mean it isn’t real! The joy of the Gospel is part of who we are.

### Prayer

As we place our trust in you, as we are loved by you and love you in return, unlock our hearts that we may know true and lasting joy in believing.

lost and has been found.”

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The second two parables are unique to this Gospel, reflecting Lucan themes and responses to the Christ event.

### KIND OF WRITING

These are all parables. As such, they are meant to destabilise the hearers and put them “in crisis,” literally in the “critical” position of having to make judgement (= *krisis* in Greek). In its context here, the third parable is furthermore incipiently allegorical—the father could be God, the faithful son, the Jewish people, the prodigal son, the tax-collectors and sinners.

### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

(i) The big background is in the book of Genesis. If you look at the stories of Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, Leah and Rachel, Manasseh and Ephraim, in each case, the second child is preferred, by God, to the first. Israelites told themselves such stories because they felt themselves to be the “second sons” within the social and political world of the ancient Near East, unexpectedly elevated to the status of first-born by God’s gracious election.

(ii) Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency.

He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from the days of old. (Mic 7:18–20)

#### NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) Within Luke, there is a tendency to use disreputable people to illustrate the Good News, to the discomfort of the officially religious: Zacchaeus, the unjust steward, the good thief, the shepherd (proverbially unable to keep the Law) and the (mean?) woman of the lost coin, the prodigal son. All these stories are unique to Luke. God can write straight with crooked lines!

(ii) God's choosing of the Israelites/Jews and the extension of his election to Gentiles are reflected upon in Romans 9-11. The allegory of the natural and wild olive trees is very helpful: Rom 11:13-24.

#### ST PAUL

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Gal 4:1–7)

#### BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verses 1-2** God's compassion to all without discrimination is the Good News, then and now.

**Verse 11** We are told of two sons at the start; both are sons.

**Verse 12** The younger son tactfully omits the rest of the sentence, "when you die"!

**Verse 13** Briefly told, without detail. Dissolute is lit. in Greek "without salvation." Heirs were entitled to use the family capital to make money, but were not free to alienate it. The young son is no longer legally a son and is cut off from *family*. Later, the older brother guesses about the women, without any evidence.

**Verse 14** Famine is frequent in this period. The son does not turn to the network of Jewish charity available to fellow Israelites in need. He has cut himself off *ethnically*.

**Verses 15-16** Pigs are unclean and forbidden. He has cut himself off *religiously*. He loses the capacity to take initiatives.

**Verse 17** Literally in Greek: *and here am I being lost*, sustaining the metaphor.

**Verses 18-19** He prepares his speech carefully—always a little suspicious! Religiously and legally he is no longer a son.

**Verse 20** The father has been looking out for him, all along! One of the shocks of the parable is this authority figure (the *paterfamilias*) setting aside his dignity and running. Compassion: this unusual, feminine word is used elsewhere twelve times in the NT: eight times of Jesus (Matt 9:36, 14:14, 15:32, 20:34; Mk 1:41, 6:34, 8:2, 9:22; Lk 7:13 and twice of God 18:27 and 15:20 in parables, and once of the Good Samaritan Lk 10:33).

**Verse 21** The prepared speech is interrupted (a careful reader should take note!).

**Verse 22** The robe, ring and sandals symbolise full restoration (the ring was a signet ring, slaves did not wear sandals).

**Verse 23** The fatted calf was being kept for some special occasion. What could be more special?

**Verse 24** Legally the son had absolved the father of all responsibility towards his son and in that sense the son really was dead to the father. The lost and found language links the parable to the lost sheep and lost coin.

**Verse 25** At last, the older son comes on scene. We travel with him and hear the noise (*symphonia*) from a distance.

**Verse 26** It is revealing that this son calls on a slave to enquire – does he feel more at home with the slaves in the household?

**Verse 27** The slave echoes the father's words.

**Verse 28** A natural reaction. Again, the father's coming out to him is a shock.

**Verse 29** Fidelity or servility?

**Verse 30** Rather nastily, the older sibling presumes unknown (to him) details.

Notice the avoidance of the word "brother."

**Verse 31** From what we know of the father, this is true. In the context in Luke, the Scribes and the Pharisees are being invited not to limit God's generosity to the expected "locations" of grace! Cf. the book of Jonah.

**Verse 32** The father, however, uses the word brother. The next step is not to be found within the parable but in life itself!

#### *Nota bene*

Both sons have misconstrued the relationship with their father. The older son *actually relates* on a basis of servile loyalty (allegorically, the Law).

The younger son, on his return, *wishes to relate* on the basis of confession of sin and desires to be treated as a slave. The father rejects both projections. Servile loyalty and guilt are not unknown in the Christian tradition. Both are false bases.

#### POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Like many a parable, this story makes its point in what seems to be unfair: the spendthrift son is rewarded and the elder son is hurt and angry. Jesus is telling us that love is a free gift, not something we earn by our goodness. This is true of human love, and is also true of God's love. When have you experienced this truth in the love you have received from others? When has the experience of human love prompted you to reflect on God's love for you?

2. After some time the younger son 'came to himself' and returned home. Where and when have you experienced a homecoming after a time of exile and alienation? What helped you to come to yourself and make that journey home?

3. The older son resented the welcome given to the younger son after his wandering and dissolute life. This contrasts with the welcome the father gave the younger son. Perhaps you have experienced these differing attitudes in yourself. What were they like for you? Where was there life for you or for others?

#### PRAYER

Undaunted you seek the lost, O God, exultant you bring home the found. Touch our hearts with grateful wonder at the tenderness of your forbearing love. Grant us delight in the mercy that has found us and bring all to rejoice at the feast of forgiveness.

# Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—I am the foremost

1 Tim 1:12 I am grateful to the one who has strengthened me, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he considered me faithful in putting me into ministry, 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor, and an arrogant man. But I was treated with mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and our Lord's grace was abundant, bringing faith and love in Christ Jesus. 15 This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them! 16 But here is why I was treated with mercy: so that in me as the worst, Christ Jesus could demonstrate his utmost patience, as an example for those who are going to believe in him for eternal life. 17 Now to the eternal king, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever! Amen.

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

For the next seven Sundays, our second readings come from 1 and 2 Timothy. There is still considerable dispute about whether the Pastorals (including Titus) come from the hand of Paul himself or not. The issues are a combination of vocabulary, history, theology and community structures. On balance, these notes will assume, with most scholars, that all three Pastorals are written *in the name of Paul* for the second or third generations of some Pauline communities, but are not from Paul himself. There is a rootedness in the "authentic" letters, of course, but the writing seems to be for another, rather more traditional and settled context. Of course, the Pastorals are still Scripture, recognised by all the traditions, and can be used for prayer and preaching.

## KIND OF WRITING

Although apparently a letter to an individual, 1 Timothy is really a public document to read out at community gatherings. The general outline is clear:

- 1:1-2 Greeting
- 1:3-20 Introduction
- 2:1-6:19 Body of the letter
- 6:20-21 Conclusion

In turn, the introduction follows a series of steps:

- 1:3-7 The false teachers
- 1:8-11 Interpreting the Law
- 1:12-17 *Thanksgiving*

## 1:18-20 Instructions to Timothy

It would be very unusual in an authentic Pauline letter to delay the thanksgiving until the third moment after two arguments.

## CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The dating of the Pastorals is not easy. They could have emerged at any time from AD 90 to AD 150. The general area seems to be around Ephesus. The concerns are twofold: (i) false teaching and (ii) instructions on behaviour and church life.

False teachings are mentioned in 1 Tim 1:3–11, 18–20; 4:1–7; 6:3–10, 20–21. If we take a combined picture from all three Pastorals, the false teachings include myths and genealogies, the Jewish law, special knowledge, bolstered by speculation and argumentativeness. An extreme asceticism characterises their mode of discipleship. In addition, the writer claims that the purveyors of such false teachings are themselves immoral, they tell lies and they seek their own material gain. This sketch is a devastating critique. Into that context, the "pastor" wishes to revive the teaching of Paul, while bringing the Pauline tradition up to date in a very new context.

## RELATED PASSAGES

Such prayer for all is good and welcomed before God our Saviour, since he wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. (1Timothy 2:3–4 NET)

Be conscientious about how you live and what you teach. Persevere in this, because by doing so you will save both yourself and those who listen to you. (1Timothy 4:16 NET)

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 12** Again it is unusual for the thanksgiving (an innovation of Paul's) to focus on the apostle himself. "Judged me faithful" suggests a time *after* Paul's conversion. It lays the ground for a theme of this letter, which is the worthiness of the ministers of the Gospel. Even the later Paul was somehow assessed.

**Verse 13** Paul's wretched past is emphasised with three phrases pointing to the same reality. It is a clue that if so

unlikely a person could become an effective proclaimer, then so can others. Paul of the undisputed letters does use the word unbelief (*apistia*) but only of the faithfulness of Israel, never about himself and exclusively in Romans (Rom 3:3; 4:20; 11:20, 23).

**Verse 14** Key Pauline words are used in this verse: grace ("mercy"), faith and love. For the Pastorals, a distinction is made between the faith of believing, the faithfulness of the ministers and the faith as a body of teaching.

**Verse 15** Qualifying "sayings" with assurances of reliability is typical of the Pastorals (1 Tim 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim 2:11; Titus 3:8). The saying itself reflects the teaching of Jesus himself and the Paul of the genuine letters. Both as very and now, salvation is a key in the Pastorals. The Paul of the pastorals underlines his own need of grace, thus closing the gap with the recipients. According to Eugene Boring, "the Pastor would not welcome the later trivialisation "Jesus saves".

**Verse 16** The author effectively repeats the message of vv. 13-14. The merciful initiative came from God himself. The historical Paul did use phrases such as *Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.* (Philippians 3:17) *And you became imitators of us and of the Lord.* (1Thessalonians 1:6)

**Verse 17** The phrasing here is typically Jewish. In this letter, monotheism is regularly underlined: 2:5; 6:15–16. To the immortality of God the writer add God's invisibility, an important and distinctive teaching of Judaism.

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER

**1.** The passage invites us to look to our own past, our own journey of grace and our awareness of the mercy of God in our lives.

**2.** The reading offers a few single sentences which may be relied upon. If you yourself were to create such a sentence, from your own experience, what would you say?

## PRAYER

O God, the initiative is always yours — yours in grace, mercy and love. Help us to stay attuned to your constant giving that we may grow as followers of your Son and as witnesses to the Good news. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

# The Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned

Exod 32:7 The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; 8 they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” 9 The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 10 Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

Exod 32:11 But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, “O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” 14 And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This reading from Exodus may both confirm and dislodge the common prejudice against the God of the OT! It is fierce, of course, but mercy triumphs as Moses persuades God to be true to himself (!).

Even so, verse 14 comes as something of a shock. (Verse 12 is restored in our reading above.)

## ORIGIN OF THE READING

Exodus tells a big story. Here is a greatly simplified outline.

- Exodus (1:1-15:22)
- Journey to Mt Sinai (15:23-18:27)
- Sinai covenant (19:1-24:11)
- Tablets of the Law (24:12-31:18)



*This bronze calf (sheathed in silver, not gold) was found at Ashkelon. It is datable to around 1550 BC and it reflects Canaanite worship of their two main male gods, Ba'al and El, in the form of a bull or calf.*

The golden calf (32-34)  
The Tabernacle is built (35-40)

Our text comes from the incident of the golden calf (chs. 32-34)

## KIND OF WRITING

With the books of the Pentateuch, it is always hard to know how much reflects history and how much is the fruit of (much) later theology. The Book of Exodus as we now have it is surely the result of complex traditions and very careful late editing. Also, it is often the case that the Bible tells the same story from two different interpretative viewpoints. Deuteronomy is a key here because it seems to provide a second account of much of what is found in Exodus.

A major difference between Exodus and Deuteronomy is that the latter knows nothing of the Tabernacle, so important for the Priestly tradition. By contrast, the golden calf narrative is found in Deut 9:7-10:11, often verbatim. Moses' intercession in Deut 9:26-29 seems to have been brought forward in Exodus to 32:11-14 to allow for the punishment of the idolators in Ex 32:25-29 which has no parallel in Deuteronomy.

## OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

They made a calf at Horeb and worshiped a cast image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their Saviour, who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. Therefore he said he would destroy them—had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn

away his wrath from destroying them. (Psalms 106:19–23)

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

Ex 32-34 is a composite whole and each part should be read in light of the entire narrative. Just how far they had fallen is clear in the previous verse: and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel. (Exodus 32:6)

**Verse 7** The Hebrew is more urgent: Go! Descend! Notice: your people, not my people.

**Verse 8** A flat rejection of YHWH as the liberator God, as they people break the very first commandment.

**Verse 9-10** Notice all the “I” verbs as God’s fearsome decision clarifies. No wonder Moses tried to calm things down. The first words of v.10 preempt such an intervention from Moses.

**Verse 11** Moses seems not to have appreciated the gravity of the people’s sin. The first of four arguments is given: you, God, went to great trouble to get the people this far! Moses responds to the Lord’s disassociation from Israel.

**Verse 12** Argument 2: Such a savage punishment will be misread by the Egyptians and bring God himself into disrepute. Argument 3: God ought to have pity on his people and change his mind.

**Verse 13** Argument 4: God’s promise to the fathers would be rendered null and void.

**Verse 14** God relents, but, as we see does not withhold punishment entirely. See Ex 32:34-35; 33:17; 34:6-7.

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Idolatry still exists even if in more “subtle” forms, such as greed or putting other values in the place of God.
2. God of love or God of anger? Or a mixture? What is your experience?

## PRAYER

O God, you love us enough to be disappointed in us: help us so to live that we experience your gracious love and come to know you as you are, merciful and gracious, truly slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

# THE LITURGY

## Exodus 32:7-11,13-14; Psalm 51 (50); 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-32

### READINGS 1 AND 3

In the first reading, God sets aside his justifiable wrath and likewise in the Gospel, the father of the prodigal son sets aside any quite natural resentment, of which there is no real trace in the father. Resentment has been transferred to the brother, and even then it is not resentment at the son's sin but at the father's forgiveness. So the readings do contrast somewhat.

### THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 51 (50) is a prayer of the repentant sinner. Perhaps we may feel a slight tension with the first reading when it is God who repents.

### SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

#### First reading

*Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14;*

This reading may sound strange to our ears. Behind it lies a picture of God who loves his people enough to be disappointed and sometimes angry but always *out of love*.

#### Second reading

*1 Timothy 1:12-17*

For the next three Sundays, we hear this early Christian letter of advice (probably not by Paul himself but a follower). Today's excerpt amounts to a late first century reflection on the conversion of St Paul, a signal event for early Christianity.

#### Gospel

*Luke 15:1-32*

Today we hear three very engaging stories of loss and restoration. The third story, while superficially similar, is actually quite different. The ending, for example, is open-ended. Why is that the case?

### WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

#### Monday 16 September

*St Cornelius and Cyprian, bishops and martyrs*

*1 Timothy 2:1-8*

Why should we pray for everyone? Because God *wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth*.

*Luke 7:1-10*

You may recognise in this appealing story a phrase we have come to use just before Holy Communion.

#### Tuesday 17 September

*St Robert Bellarmine*

*1 Timothy 3:1-13*

This job description of a good Christian leader is revealing: *what* was going on (even then!) that the writer needed to spell it out so?

*Luke 7:11-17*

You will notice the echoes of Elijah raising the widow's son — all part of Luke's portrait of Jesus as prophet *par excellence*.

#### Wednesday 18 September

*1 Timothy 3:14-16*

Today, the writer quotes a brief early Christian hymn about Jesus. Even if the language is fairly oblique, all the essentials are there.

*Luke 7:31-35*

Some people can be very hard to please — a human reality which emerges clearly in this reading. Rejecting both John the Baptist and Jesus, their ingenuity is a warning for today. We too find ways around faith...

#### Thursday 19 September

*St Januarius, bishop and martyr*

*1 Timothy 4:12-16*

A young person in ministry can, understandably, feel a bit daunted. Our reading today offers encouragement not to lose heart.

*Luke 7:36-50*

The irritability of "holy" people is twice registered in this Gospel. Firstly, in the mind of the Pharisee, someone holy like Jesus ought not to allow anyone so obviously "unholy" to touch him. The parable offered is hardly rocket science!

The discussion which follows draws out the blindingly obvious. But things get worse: Jesus pronounces forgiveness, which leads to even greater "holy" consternation.

#### Friday 20 September

*Saints Andrew Kim Taegon, Priest, and Paul*

*Chong Hasang, and their Companions, Martyrs*

*1 Timothy 6:2-12*

Even in those days, believer could go off the rails, led by leaders interested only in money. Our reading, in response, is both ironic and clear.

*Luke 8:1-3*

Women were important in Jesus' ministry as well as in the very first generations of Christians. Today we get a rare view of the circle closest to Jesus, answering our very practical question of how did they all manage? With a lot of hidden help, apparently.

#### Saturday 21 September

*St Matthew, apostle and evangelist*

*Ephesians 4:1-7,11-13*

The readings are special for the feast. The first one from Ephesians reminds us of the variety of gifts needed in the community of faith, including the gift of teaching and writing.

*Matthew 9:9-13*

It is historically unlikely that the Matthew of this story was the author of the Gospel. Nevertheless, the story does go to the heart of the proclamation of Jesus, a proclamation of compassion, just as challenging today as in Jesus' day.

