

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Exodus 32:7-11.13-14 / Luke 15:1-32)
11.09.2016
God is joyful

To make an artistic representation of God is by its very nature a difficult endeavor. Over the centuries, many attempts were made and, unfortunately, there have been very few convincing results.

The most astonishing thing is that we have been quick to endorse the Greek vision of God as an unmoved mover. In most paintings and sculptures, our God looks remote from us, untouched, with a face frozen in an attitude of eternal impenetrability and unresponsiveness.

This God has little to do with the God we meet in the Scriptures. Today, our two biblical readings present us with a God who feels deeply about his people, a God whose heart is stirred by concerns and joy.

Here we are not just dealing with a literary process which would apply to God human feelings in order to help us understand how God connects with his creation. The whole biblical revelation bears witness to the fact that our God is a living God, and to be alive implies being able to feel.

In the Bible, we read about God's impatience with his people, God's generosity, God's loving kindness, God's contentment at Creation. God feels. However with the incarnation, our God no longer feels just his own feelings but now he feels ours too. Because of Jesus Christ, in the Trinity, what we feel as human beings is mysteriously part of the divinity.

It is important for us to remember that God knows what we feel. He does so not in a voyeuristic way but in loving communion with us, being, as St Augustine reminds us, "closer to us than we are to ourselves" (*Conf.* III,6,11).

In the parables we have heard, Jesus describes God as a shepherd, as a woman and as a father. These three images for God used in our parables display courage, boldness, perseverance and patience in order to find once again what they have lost.

The shepherd, the woman and the father all have something in common: they know what joy is all about. Not only are they joyful but they are eager to share their joy with others. God is joyful and longs to share his joy with all.

I do not think that I exaggerate when I say that we rarely hear people speak about God being joyful. Yet at the end of each parable we heard we are invited to rejoice with God.

Why is God joyful?

Maybe we find a hint of an answer in the philosopher Bergson when he writes: "Wherever there is joy, there is creation; the richer the creation, the deeper the joy" (*L'énergie spirituelle*, quoted in Foley, *Life lessons from Bergson*, p. 88). In the recovery of the sheep, of the drachma and of the son, we witness a creation which is restored and this explains why joy is so present.

In the three parables something precious has been lost. We see it clearly in the parable of the prodigal son, the problem is more than ownership, it is about life, belonging and relationship, versus death, division, rejection and isolation.

Each time we are in a situation of division and mutual exclusion, we are struggling with a process of de-creation, we are dealing with sin and the sadness of sin. Each time, we

foster communion, better understanding and harmony, we become co-creators with God and we rejoice with him.

In the first two parables, we see how God spares no efforts and energy to recover what is lost. In Jesus Christ, God does not spare his only Son in order to recover all of us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about “costly grace”, I think that we could speak about “costly joy”. In our world marked by sin and death, we are supposed to spare no time, no skill, no energy, and no talents in order to recover what is lost in humanity and in the world.

Here our responsibility is great because each time we allow bitterness and anger, bigotry and exclusion, racism and discrimination, lies and violence to prevail, we participate in the de-creation process initiated by the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

The joy to which we are called, is God’s joy in his victory over sin and death. It is the joy of being like God, alive and life-giving. It is the joy which announces that life has gained ground and conquered: “we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life”.

It is the joy we experience when we speak a word of encouragement and support, when we give ourselves generously to others and when we receive with gratitude, when we take time to understand those different to us and when we express ourselves with respect and patience.

Indeed we are far from a cheap and easy joy. But let us be clear this is the joy promised to us by Jesus, a joy that no one will take away from us (cf. Jn 16:22).