

## 24<sup>th</sup>. Sunday in Ordinary Time

On Sunday last two of my sisters and I went to see the film “Amazing Grace”. It was an unusual film of the recording sessions of Aretha Franklin singing Gospel songs. It was filmed at a Baptist Prayer meeting over two nights some forty years ago. My older sister Jean was very disappointed with what she saw and said it was the worst film that she had seen for a long time. But there were a number of things about the film that I found quite moving. Aretha’s singing came across to me as being a real expression of prayer. I saw the interchange between the choir and herself as a wonderful expression of community prayer. The timing of the jazz styled gospel music demanded acute listening, the kind of listening that is meant to be part of every prayer. But what I kept asking myself as I watched and listened was, “What kind of a God is she singing to? What is the image of God that is behind the music that she and the choir were singing?”

Each one of us could ask the question, “Who is the God that we pray to? What is God like for me?” Many of the people who saw Jesus and heard what he had to say could not recognise him as the one who had come to reveal God to us. Perhaps they could not see God in Jesus because he was doing things and saying things that did not fit in with their image of God.

It was because Jesus spent so much time in the company of sinners and outcasts that many people rejected Jesus and his word. Jesus wanted those people to have a new kind of a picture of God. It was because Jesus wanted to change the hearts of these people that he told three stories, three parables that describes for us all what God is like.

God is like a foolish shepherd who leaves behind the ninety nine sheep that were obedient enough to stay together in a flock so that he can go off and find the one sheep that had wandered away. He risks everything to find that lost sheep. And this foolish shepherd does not give up looking until he finds that wayward sheep. And when he finds the lost sheep, he carries it home on his shoulders and calls together his friends to rejoice with him. God is like a woman who having lost a small coin cleans the house from top to bottom searching everywhere for it until she has found it. And when she finds the coin she calls in her neighbours to celebrate with her. The third story we know well. God is like the father who longs for his wayward son to return home. He runs to meet him and orders a lavish meal to celebrate that the lost son has been found again.

These very powerful parables help us to understand that our God is a God of mercy. Our God is a forgiving God who puts no conditions upon the love that he has for us.

When we can claim that picture of God for ourselves, when we can say that we have experienced God's unconditional love for us, then we can start to paint that picture for others. Not only can we, but we must do that. Every disciple of Jesus is called to be a sign of who God is. Every one of us is meant to reveal something of the nature of God to others.

There is something else that comes through in these parables that we might miss. Our God breaks the rules that many of us live by. There are no winners and losers with God. God does not love someone at the expense of someone else. God is not an "either or" God. God reaches out in love to different people in the same beautiful way. We see this especially in the third parable. The father loves both of his sons, not just the one who squandered his inheritance. He runs out to welcome home the lost son. But he also goes out from the party to invite in the older son to join in the celebrations for his brother's return.

The people who were criticising Jesus could not understand how he could have time for them and have time for the people that they called sinners. The God that they prayed to is a God who blesses the good and rewards the just and who punishes law breakers and condemns sinners. How could Jesus sit at table with

those who break the law? How could Jesus eat with sinners if he is a prophet of God?

When Pope Francis wrote his Apostolic Exhortation to young people after the Synod on Youth, he began his fourth chapter by saying, "The very first truth I would tell each of you is this: "God loves you". It makes no difference whether you have already heard it or not. I want to remind you of it. God loves you. Never doubt this, whatever may happen to you in life. At every moment, you are infinitely loved.

Perhaps your experience of fatherhood has not been the best. Your earthly father may have been distant or absent, or harsh and domineering. Or maybe he was just not the father you needed. I don't know. But what I can tell you, with absolute certainty, is that you can find security in the embrace of your heavenly Father, of the God who first gave you life and continues to give it to you at every moment. He will be your firm support, but you will also realize that he fully respects your freedom."

I think that Pope Francis was presenting to young people and to all of us an image of God that comes through so clearly in today's gospel. This is the God who reaches out in love to everyone of us and who celebrates with joy when those of us who get lost are found again.