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Father Cantalamessa on the Prodigal Son

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on Sunday's Readings

ROME, MARCH 16, 2007 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of a commentary by the Pontifical Household preacher, Capuchin Father Raneiro Cantalamessa, on the readings for this Sunday's liturgy.

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Jesus and Sinners

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Joshua 5:9a, 10-12; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The Gospel for the Fourth Sunday of Lent is one of the most celebrated pages of Luke's Gospel and of all four Gospels: the parable of the prodigal son. Everything in this parable is surprising; men had never portrayed God in this way. This parable has touched more hearts than all the sermons that have been preached put together. It has an incredible power to act on the mind, the heart, the imagination, and memory. It is able to touch the most diverse chords: repentance, shame, nostalgia.

The parable is introduced with these words: "All the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to him to listen to him. The Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable ..." (Luke 15:1-2). Following this lead, we would like to reflect on Jesus' attitude toward sinners, going through the whole Gospel, guided also by our plan for these Lenten commentaries, that is, to know better who Jesus was, what can be historically known about him.

The welcome that Jesus reserves for sinners in the Gospel is well known, as is the opposition that this procures him on the part of the defenders of the law who accuse him of being "a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34). Jesus declares in one of his better historically attested sayings, "I have not come to call the just but sinners" (Mark 2:17). Feeling welcomed and not judged by him, sinners listened to him gladly.

But who were the sinners, what category of persons was designated by this term? Someone, trying to completely justify Jesus' adversaries, the Pharisees, has argued that by this term is understood "the deliberate and impenitent transgressors of the law," in other words, the criminals, those who are outside the law. If this were so, then Jesus' adversaries would have been entirely right to be scandalized and see him as an irresponsible and socially dangerous person. It would be as if a priest today were to regularly frequent members of the mafia and criminals and accept their invitations to dinner with the pretext of speaking to them of God.

In reality, this is not how things are. The Pharisees had their vision of the law and of what conformed to it or was contrary, and they considered reprobate all those who did not follow their rigid interpretation of the law. In their view, anyone who did not follow their traditions or dictates was a sinner. Following the same logic, the Essenes of Qumran considered the Pharisees themselves to be unjust and violators of the law! The same

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thing happens today. Certain ultraorthodox groups consider all those who do not think exactly as they do to be heretics.

An eminent scholar has written: "It is not true that Jesus opened the gates of the kingdom to hard-boiled and impenitent criminals, or that he denied the existence of 'sinners.' What Jesus opposed were the walls that were erected within Israel and those who treated other Israelites as if they were outside the covenant and excluded from God's grace" (James Dunn).

Jesus does not deny the existence of sin and sinners. This is obvious from the fact that he calls them "sick." On this point he is more rigorous than his adversaries. If they condemn actual adultery, Jesus condemns adultery already at the stage of desire; if the law says not to kill, Jesus says that we must not even hate or insult our brother. To the sinners who draw near to him, he says "Go and sin no more"; he does not say: "Go and live as you were living before."

What Jesus condemns is the Pharisees' relegating to themselves the determination of true justice and their denying to others the possibility of conversion. The way that Luke introduces the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is significant: "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others" (Luke 18:9). Jesus was more severe with those who condemned sinners with disdain than he was with sinners themselves.

But the novel and unheard of thing in the relationship between Jesus and sinners is not his goodness and mercy toward them. This can be explained in a human way. There is, in his attitude, something that cannot be humanly explained, that is, it cannot be explained so long as Jesus is taken to be a man like other men. What is novel and unheard of is Jesus' forgiveness of sins.

Jesus says to the paralytic: "My son, your sins are forgiven you."

"Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Jesus' horrified adversaries cry out. And Jesus replies: "So that you might know that the Son of Man has the authority to forgive sins, Get up!" he said to the paralytic, 'Pick up your mat and go home.'" No one could verify whether the sins of that man were forgiven but everyone could see that he got up and walked. The visible miracle attested to the invisible one.

Even the investigation of Jesus' relationship with sinners contributes therefore to an answer to the question: Who was Jesus? A man like other men, a prophet, or something different still? During his earthly life Jesus never explicitly affirmed himself to be God (and we explained why in a previous commentary), but he did attribute to himself powers that are exclusive to God.

Let us now return to Sunday's Gospel and to the parable of the prodigal son. There is a common element that unites the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, which are told in succession in Chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel. What do the shepherd who finds the lost sheep and the woman who finds her coin say? "Rejoice with me!" And what does Jesus say at the end of each parable? "There will be more joy in heaven for a converted sinner than for ninety-nine just people who do not need to convert."

The leitmotiv of the three parables is therefore the joy of God. (There is joy "before the angels of God," is an entirely Jewish way to speak of joy "in God.") In our parable joy overflows and becomes a feast. That father is overcome with joy and does not know what to do: He orders the best robe for his son, a ring with the family seal, the killing of the fatted calf, and says to all: "Let us eat and make merry, for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

In one of his novels Dostoyevsky describes a scene that has the air of having been witnessed in reality. A woman holds a baby a few weeks old in her arms and -- for the first time, according to her -- he smiles at her.

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All contrite, she makes the sign of the cross on his forehead and to those who ask her the reason for this she says: "Just as a mother is happy when she sees the first smile of her child, God too rejoices every time a sinner gets on his knees and addresses a heartfelt prayer to him" ("The Idiot").

Who knows whether a person who is listening does not decide finally to give this joy to God, to smile at him before he dies ...

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