

## MERCY OVER JUDGEMENT

7<sup>th</sup> September 2025

(Father's Day)

### READINGS<sup>1</sup>

#### **Exodus 32:7-14**

*The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; 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!'"*

*The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 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."*

*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? 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."*

*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.'" And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.*

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<sup>1</sup> New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition of the Bible.

**Luke 15:1-7**

*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

*So he told them this parable: "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? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.*

*And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.' 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.*

**REFLECTION**

(Rev. Toby Keva)

I like being a dad, but I'm not a perfect father. No, I do not always act lovingly or kindly towards my children. There are moments when I see my children more like 'little monsters' than 'adorable little creatures.' (None of these, by the way, is an accurate description of our children.) I have lost count on how many times I raised my voice to get their attention or to teach them a 'lesson'. Many times, I was burnt with anger and with the desire to punish them for their wrongdoings.

Yes, I am far from being an 'ideal' father, if there is such a thing!

In the Hebrew Scriptures (or the Old Testament as we know it in the Church), one of the most enduring and popular way the people in Israel see their God is to see God as their father and the people as His children.

But the relationship between God as the father and the people as His children, as depicted in the Scriptures, is more complex than we often want to admit. Like us, God does not always act in loving kindness towards Israel. There are many moments when God is burnt with anger towards the people; when God is ready to severely punish His children; when God is seen to be even murderous towards God's own people!

I think it is important that we acknowledge this difficult portrayal of the Divine in our Scriptures, otherwise we will only romanticize the relationship between God and the people that bears no resemblance whatsoever with how it is actually depicted in the Bible.

Trying to sanitize the way Israel viewed God will also do no justice to the reality that we see on the ground. There are people out there who choose not to celebrate Father's Day or Mother's Day because they had traumatic memories with their dad or mum. We live in the world where not all the fathers are loving towards their children; where some fathers can become so evil that they would abandon or even kill their own children!

So to gloss over some of the difficult descriptions of how God relate to the people in the Scriptures is unbiblical. The God of Israel, as depicted in the Hebrew Scriptures, is the God who is often burnt with passion. The God of Israel is nothing like the divine being who was imagined by the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, as the 'unmoved mover' who is passionless, unchanging, pure, self-sufficient, and unconcerned with the world; a divine being so removed from our reality that it is not affected whatsoever by what happens in the world.

But this is not the God of Israel. Israel's God is a Being who is deeply involved with the people. As such, God is deeply affected by the way the people behave. God is joyful when God's people do what God wants them to do and is deeply hurt when the people rebels against God's will.

So, yes, God can be burnt with anger. Yet, the Scriptures also proclaims that God is always ready to return to mercy. This is the key message that we often hear especially in the writings of the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah.

This is also the key message that we hear today from the book of Exodus. Here, God is burnt by his anger towards Israel's transgressions. Yet, even in the midst of fury, God still listens to the pleading that Moses makes on his people's behalf.

Moses even manages to convince God to change His course of action. The Hebrew word that is translated as "to change one's mind" also means "to regret" or "to feel sorry".<sup>2</sup> So, we are told that even God regrets or feels sorry for considering punishing the people severely!

It is this enduring loving character of God that Jesus often reminded people of. While the religious leaders at the time, like the Pharisees and the Scribes, often emphasized the judgmental character of the God of Israel, Jesus reminded them about His loving nature. And Jesus often did this by telling them parables, one of which is our reading for today.

Now, the sheep in the parable, however, are not seen simply as a commodity. Most shepherds in Jesus' time were hired labors. As such, they did not benefit from the selling of the sheep. I can imagine, therefore, that many became attached emotionally to the sheep under their care.

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<sup>2</sup> See Commentary on Exodus 32-7-14 by Safwat Marzouk in Working Preacher from Luther Seminary (<https://www.workingpreacher.org>).

It is this loving relationship between the shepherd and the sheep under his care that Jesus is depicting in his parable. When Jesus asks, “Would any of you leave behind the 99 sheep to look for the one who is lost?” he expects people to answer that no one, in his right mind, would ever risk leaving behind the 99 sheep to look for the one who has gone astray.<sup>3</sup>

But a shepherd who was emotionally attached to his sheep would not bear to leave behind the one who was lost. He was like a father who would cross every mountain and sea to be with his child.

Since my oldest son, Abinaya, was born until he was around eight months old, we lived separately. He still lived in Indonesia with my wife, Rita, and I lived here in Australia while we were working to secure a visa for Rita to come. During these eight months, I travelled to Indonesia five times to be with my wife and my newborn son. So I literally crossed seas and mountains (albeit on a plane) to be with my family. I decided that, if the worst came and we didn't get the visa, I was willing to abandon everything that I had to be reunited with my family.

So, through a parable like this, Jesus tried to teach the religious leaders in his time to see God not as a judgmental tyrant, but as a loving Father who was willing to see beyond the transgressions of His children.

No, Jesus didn't say that God was not hurt when his children do evil things against His will. As a rabbi who was steeped in the teaching of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus knew that God was deeply disappointed by the actions of His children. But, for Jesus, in the end of the day, God's love towards His children would always triumph over His fury.

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<sup>3</sup> See Commentary on Luke 15-1-10 by E. Trey Clark in Working Preacher from Luther Seminary (<https://www.workingpreacher.org>).

Friends, no relationship is clean and tidy. Today, we learn how God's relationship with His children can also be messy. It is full of ups and downs. But this is because the God whom we encounter in the Scriptures is the God who is deeply involved in the life of His children.

Yet, even in the midst of the messiness, the Scriptures teach us that the Divine love always prevails against the judgement. The letter of James summarizes this simply and beautifully when it says, "Mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13 NRSV)."

The same is true with our own relationship, especially with the ones closest to us: our partner, our parents, our children. Those relationship can also be messy and full of pains and hurts.

Yet, today we learn from God, the Father, who looks beyond the transgressions and the betrayals done to Him by His children. After all, true joy in life is found when we are united, once again, with the ones closest to our hearts, just like the shepherd, in Jesus' parable, is greatly joyful when he finds the one sheep that is lost.

Happy Father's Day everyone.

Amen.