

24th Sunday (C)

- When you think about God, what image comes to mind?
- What is your image of God? A judge,... a vengeful, punishing God,... a rigorous, unforgiving God,... a God who is always silent,... a God too big to worry about me,... a God who only loves me when I am good,... a friend,... a lover,... a carer,... a guide,... a source of strength...?
- On a retreat some time ago we were asked to contemplate our image of God – mine was that of a loving father.
- Depending on your relationship with your own father, that may not work because we transpose what we know of the metaphor we use to our imagination of what God is like.
- But we do need a helpful image for ourselves that can become the means by which God can reveal himself as he really is, & not as we can falsely imagine God to be.
- Jesus helps us with images that reveal the God he has come to know.
- Each of today's readings reinforce the image of father for me: a God who saves & blesses; a God who loves & forgives in the face of my own sin & rejection of him; & a God who seeks out the lost, forgives, reconciles & gives birth to new life in us & in our relationships.
- The whole point of Jesus' life & ministry is to clarify for us the nature & character of God & break down the false idols & images of God we've created for ourselves – images that aren't only unhelpful, but sometimes positively destructive for ourselves & others.
- This is the whole point of Jesus' parables – to break down false notions & describe the God Jesus came to know & love as a human person.
- You see, our images of God aren't just theoretical, or just in our minds in such a way that they don't really affect us.
- Even our images of people determine the way we relate to them: your images of your parents or children or spouse or friend determine the way you relate to them, even the way you live your life.
- The image you have of yourself determines how you present yourself to others & how you live life.
- People's images of God determine their relationship with him & the way they live their faith & how that faith affects their lives, & how they consider other people.
- A friend of mine who was dying of cancer was unable for a long time to accept the sacrament of anointing because he felt that he hadn't been close to God & had not practised his faith – he had too great a debt to pay to God – so it would be hypocritical of him to come to God in his need.
- A woman who I've seen many times with problems in her life, cannot come to love God, because for her, God is demanding, exacting & authoritarian &

is always expecting her to do the right things & she is resentful & critical of people who she believes do not live responsibly.

- Jesus, however, spoke more of a God of justice & compassion, a God who reaches out to us to embrace us in forgiving & healing love.
- And even as intimate & loving as the Good Shepherd metaphor is, Jesus is clear about our freedom to choose between life in Him & the path which draws us away - none of us is coerced into the flock.
- We know & hear the voice of the one who loves us most & are drawn to him, & can make a return every time we stray.
- We'd like to think that we're one of the 99 that don't cause trouble for the shepherd because we're fine, but I suspect that each of us is the lost stray, at least at certain times in our lives.
- The woman searching for the lost coin is an image of God as the One who loves us, sees us as precious, knows we are lost, & searches for us until we are found.
- When have you felt 'lost'? When have you felt far away from God?
- Do you feel that way now? If so, what is it like? How does it affect your life?
- If not, what happened to bring you back to God?
- Lots of problems can bring us down so that we become depressed; develop unhealthy attitudes, behaviours or addictions; & start to mess up our life.
- When have you needed some kind of special help or support during a 'lost' time in your life?
- The woman searching for the lost coin can also be an image of us – one who sees a friend who is in trouble, or lost, who knows that the friend is precious, & who goes after that friend in the hope of being supportive until that friend can come around.
- Until we admit our prejudices, jealousies, spitefulness & selfishness – at least to ourselves to begin with – the shadow sides of ourselves, then these parables have nothing to say to us & we remain lost & more importantly, we won't allow God to change the image we have of him.
- Remember that we have a responsibility to hand on an undistorted image of God to others whose lives we touch, especially to those who desperately need to know God.
- May this Eucharist, then, sharpen our hearing to his call & help us to delight in his loving embrace.
- And may it embolden us to be good shepherds to those we love so that we might risk everything, in his name, to be foolishly loving & compassionate to all we claim as our own.
- So, are you open to the God who is infinitely more than we can imagine?