



« EVEN THOUGH I HAD
ON MY CONSCIENCE
ALL THE SINS... »^{1 2}

Carmelite Online Lenten Retreat 2025 – Thérèse of Lisieux and the Paschal Mystery

Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Saint Luke (Lk 15:11–32)

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him

¹ References: Aletti, J-N. 2022, L’Évangile selon saint Luc. Commentaire, Lessius, Brussels; Alliance Biblique Universelle & Éditions du Cerf 1988, La Bible: Traduction Œcuménique de la Bible, Alliance Biblique Universelle & Éditions du Cerf, Paris; Clapier, J. 2003, Aimer jusqu’à mourir d’amour: Thérèse et le mystère pascal, Cerf, Paris; Gaucher, G. 2010, Sainte Thérèse de Lisieux (1873–1897), Cerf, Paris; Cerf 1996, Les mots de Sainte Thérèse de l’Enfant-Jésus: Concordance, Paris; Thérèse de Lisieux 1992, Œuvres complètes, Cerf-DDB, Paris.

² All citations from St. Thérèse of Lisieux’s writings in this retreat are taken from the translations published by ICS Publications, Washington, DC.



back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

God’s Infinite Mercy and His Unconditional Love

About this Gospel, the great French writer Charles Péguy said: **“If all copies of the Gospel were to be destroyed throughout the world, at least one page should be preserved—the one recounting the parable of the prodigal son—so that we might finally understand who God is: the Father who watches, waits, opens His arms, and forgives.”**

If you were asked to speak about the God in whom you believe and whom you love—using an image that is more vivid than abstract concepts—this Sunday’s Gospel offers you one! Indeed, in this parable, known as that of the prodigal son, which is unique to Luke the Evangelist, we see a figure who provides a “true image” of our God (there are so many distorted images of God circulating in our culture). Of course, it is only an image—our God can’t be reduced to an image!

The image is that of a merciful man—beyond anything we can imagine. The man who had two sons! Let’s consider him at three key moments in the story.

The first moment is when the younger son asks his father for his share of the inheritance. The text states simply: *“So he divided his property between them.”* The father’s consent is striking. While it isn’t unheard of for a son to ask for his inheritance—after all, the younger son had the right to do so—it could still be seen as a sign of disrespect. Later in the text, the son acknowledges that he has sinned against his father, though the exact nature of his wrongdoing is not specified.

Next, let’s look at the moment when the younger son returns to his father. *“But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.”* An extraordinary response in the ancient Near East! The father gives no thought to his dignity as a respectable, elderly man—he runs like a young man, or almost like a child, so spontaneous is his movement, without calculation or hesitation. He embraces his son as a mother would, reunited with her beloved child after a long separation. And then he orders a celebration! All the sorrow his younger son had caused him—by demanding his inheritance and leaving for a distant land—seems to have vanished! We rarely see such a response in real life... **No reproach, no condemnation, not even a reproof. Nothing but the joy of a life restored!** What a lesson for us!...



Finally, let's look at the father in his conversation with his eldest son, who is angry, resentful, and jealous. He takes the first step; he goes out to meet him, since his son refuses to come inside, and he explains, simply, without contradicting his son's arguments, why they must rejoice at his younger brother's return: *"We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life..."* The heart of the message is in these words: *this brother of yours was dead and has come to life. **Isn't life the most precious gift we have received?*** What an extraordinary man this father is! He's the true hero of the parable.

What does this father teach us? **That nothing is more important than mercy, nothing but limitless, unconditional love!** What would our world be without tenderness, without forgiveness, without love? A living hell!

We love this parable; it helps strengthen our faith in a merciful God. He shows His mercy to both of His sons, regardless of which one we might identify with. Let's listen to His teaching. **God always takes the first step toward us, the second step is ours,** and from that moment on, everything can change for the better.

In this Sunday's Gospel, the parable isn't centered on the younger son's conversion, which may not be entirely authentic since he decides to return to his father only when he's in distress, but on the father's unconditional love, a figure of God the Father. In the eyes of the older son, the father seems to excuse everything the younger son has done, which his older brother finds unjust. This isn't a true story—it's a parable. Jesus uses it to teach the Pharisees and scribes—who don't understand the welcome He extends to tax collectors and sinners—that His mission is to make known to humanity the infinite mercy of God. That's a message that Thérèse certainly received, accepted, and passed on!

"Jesus, I want to pray unceasingly for sinners"

"Even though I had on my conscience all the sins that can be committed, I would go, my heart broken with sorrow, and throw myself into Jesus' arms, for I know how much He loves the prodigal child who returns to Him." This is the second-to-last sentence from Manuscript C, folio 36 recto (Ms C, 36r), which Thérèse wrote in pencil at the beginning of July 1897, just a few months before her death. In it, Thérèse expresses her certainty of God's mercy. This certainty has long been present in Thérèse. Let's remember that after the grace of Christmas 1886, which she called "my complete conversion" (Ms A, 45r), **Thérèse had a great desire to work for the conversion of sinners.** She recounts:

"One Sunday, looking at a picture of Our Lord on the Cross, I was struck by the blood flowing from one of the divine hands. I felt a great pang of sorrow when thinking this blood was falling to the ground without anyone's hastening to gather it up. I was resolved to remain in spirit at the foot of the Cross and to receive the divine dew. I understood I was then to pour it out upon souls. The cry of Jesus on the Cross sounded continually in my heart: "I thirst!" These words ignited within me an unknown and very living fire. I wanted to give my Beloved to drink and I felt myself consumed with a thirst for souls. As yet, it was not the souls of priests



that attracted me, but those of great sinners; I burned with the desire to snatch them from the eternal flames. To awaken my zeal God showed me my desires were pleasing to Him. I heard talk of a great criminal just condemned to death for some horrible crimes; everything pointed to the fact that he would die impenitent. I wanted at all costs to prevent him from falling into hell ...”

Thérèse asks Céline to have a Mass said for her intentions, and she feels compelled to tell her everything. Céline doesn't make fun of her but takes the matter seriously. **Thérèse is then fully convinced that God will answer her prayers.** Speaking of God, Thérèse recounts:

“I was sure He would pardon the poor, unfortunate Pranzini; that I'd believe this even if he went to his death without any signs of repentance or without having gone to confession. I was absolutely confident in the mercy of Jesus. But I was begging Him for a “sign” of repentance only for my own simple consolation. My prayer was answered to the letter!” (Ms A, 46r).

Thus, Thérèse becomes an apostle of the infinite mercy of Jesus. **She considers herself, though not expressing it in these terms, as a mediator between sinners and Jesus.**

“It was a true interchange of love: to souls I was giving the blood of Jesus, to Jesus I was offering these same souls refreshed by the divine dew. I slaked His thirst and the more I gave Him to drink, the more the thirst of my poor little soul increased, and it was this ardent thirst He was giving me as the most delightful drink of His love” (Ms A, 46v).

It becomes clearer when reading these lines why she calls the course of her spiritual life “a giant's course” from the grace of Christmas onward. **The theme of mercy is central in all of Thérèse's writings.**

One example among many is this excerpt from stanza 16 of Poem 24, *Jesus, My Beloved, Remember!* ... in which she reminds Jesus of her vocation to Carmel!

*When a sinner raises his eyes to you.
Ah! I want to increase that great joy.
Jesus, I want to pray unceasingly for sinners.
That I came to Carmel
To fill your beautiful Heaven,
Remember.....*

At the beginning of Manuscript A, folio 2 recto, she writes these words: “I'm going to be doing only one thing: I shall begin to sing what I must sing eternally: ‘The Mercies of the Lord.’” On the last pages of this spiritual autobiography, written at the end of 1895, she writes:

*“Ah! must not the infinitely just God, who deigns to pardon the faults of the prodigal son with so much kindness, be just also toward me who ‘am with Him always’? This year, June 9, the feast of the Holy Trinity, **I received the grace to understand more than ever before how much Jesus desires to be loved.** I was thinking about the souls who offer themselves as victims of God’s Justice in order to turn away the punishments reserved to sinners, drawing them upon themselves. This offering seemed great and very generous to me, but I was far from feeling attracted to making it. From the depths of my heart, I cried out: “O my God! Will Your Justice alone find souls willing to immolate themselves as victims? Does not Your Merciful Love need them too? On every side this love is unknown, rejected; [...] It seems to me that if You were to find souls offering themselves as victims of holocaust to Your Love, You would consume them rapidly; it seems to me, too, that You would be happy not to hold back the waves of infinite tenderness within You. If Your Justice loves to release itself, this Justice which extends only over the earth, how much more does Your Merciful Love desire to set souls on fire since Your Mercy reaches to the heavens. O my Jesus, let me be this happy victim; consume Your holocaust with the fire of Your Divine Love!” (Ms A, 84r).*

On 9 June 1895, Thérèse made her offering without any formula, in a few words, during the Mass of the Holy Trinity, through a special grace. **The Act of Offering to Merciful Love was written in the following days with the permission of her prioress, Mother Agnes, so that others might also offer themselves, as well.**

On this *Laetare Sunday*, let’s return to the final verse of the Gospel: “*We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found!*” The closing verse of today’s Gospel powerfully demonstrates **how deeply our God loves the sinner—the sinner who truly repents upon recognizing the power of this Love.** Thérèse was, during her time on earth, and remains in heaven, a fervent apostle of God’s mercy. May she intercede for all the prodigal children of our time, that they may be restored to joy!

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Monday, 31 March: Take Heart

« Ah! dear little Brother, ever since I have been given the grace to understand also the love of the Heart of Jesus, I admit that it has expelled all fear from my heart. » (LT 247)

« There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. » (1 Jn 4:18)

Even when I doubt, even when I am weak, in prayer and in my heart, I will surrender to His holy will.



Tuesday, 1 April: Receive His Overflowing Love

« The vessel of divine Mercy overflowed for me! » (LT 230)

« Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy, he has given us a new birth. » (1Pet 1:3)

How do I nourish myself spiritually? Is my way of life in harmony with my spiritual desires?

Wednesday, 2 April: Contemplate His Creation

« To me He has granted His infinite Mercy, and through it I contemplate and adore the other divine perfections! » (Ms A, 83v)

« Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. » (Heb 4:16)

To give thanks, I can learn to contemplate His creation—whether in nature or in silence...



Thursday, 3 April: Trust in the Father's Love

« God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and he will show pity to whom he will show pity. » (Ms A, 2 r)

« You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy; do not stray, or else you may fall. » (Sir 2:7)

By rereading the parable of the prodigal son, I will learn to let myself be loved by the Father.

Friday, 4 April: Pray for Souls

« There are souls for whom His mercy never tires of waiting. » (Ms C, 21r)

« God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all. » (Rom 11:32)

Like Thérèse, I will entrust to God someone who moves me deeply, praying for the salvation of their soul.



Saturday, 5 April: Love Jesus

« O Jesus! ... I feel that if You found a soul weaker and littler than mine, which is impossible, You would be pleased to grant it still greater favors, provided it abandoned itself with total confidence to Your Infinite Mercy. » (Ms B, 5v)

« His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. » (Lk 1:50)

I will meditate on Thérèse's Act of Oblation to Merciful Love. How does it speak to my life?