

24th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Cycle C, 9.15.19

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17;

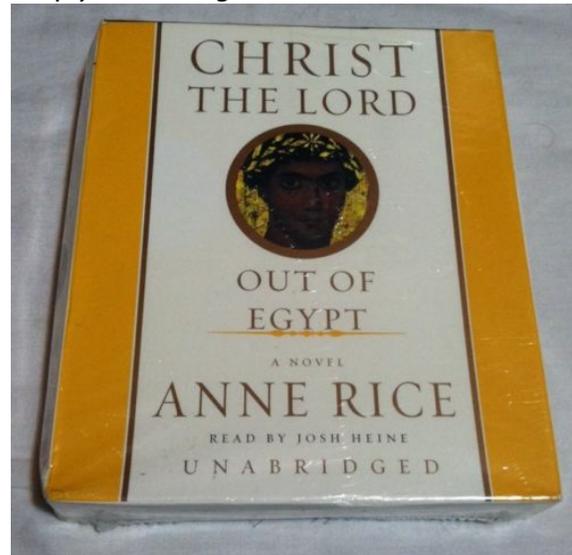
Luke 15:1-32

OUT OF DARKNESS

Years before the rage of the "Twilight Saga" – the vampire books and movies which were so popular with teens and young adults a few years ago, best-selling novelist Anne Rice wrote several books about vampires, including "Interview with the Vampire" and "Vampire Chronicles." Two of them were made into movies, one starring Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise. She has also written stories about witches and even some erotica. Since Rice made her reputation - and her fortune - on that strange genre, many were surprised when, twenty years ago, she announced that she was writing no more of those stories, but from now on, would write only for God. And, in fact, she produced three novels about Jesus. In her autobiography, *Called out of Darkness*, Anne Rice describes what led to this dramatic change. In it, she tells of growing up in New Orleans and attending a Catholic church. As child and teen, she had been quite religious. In fact, when she was twelve, she wanted to be a priest. She was disappointed when she learned that the priesthood wasn't open to females. When she left home, however, living for twenty years in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district, and exposed to the wider world, she not only ceased to be religious; she also became an atheist and remained so for much of her adult life.

But in her late 50s, after she became aware of something happening inside her. She wrote: *I became convinced that I was being pursued by the Lord. I did not think literally, "He is pursuing me." After all, he wasn't supposed to exist. He was supposed*

to be an idea. He was "located" in nostalgia. I thought something is pursuing me. Something is happening. Rice then tells of how she was gradually drawn back into the church. She said it was her "return to faith ... to the loving and eternally outstretched arms of the Lord." There was nothing dramatic or tragic happening in her life that brought her back, she says, but she found herself losing "faith" in atheism and in the nothingness it fostered within her. She said: *"In the moment of surrender, I let go of all the theological or social questions which had kept me from God for countless years. I simply let them go."*



The story of Anne Rice's conversion came to mind when I reflected on today's gospel about the 'prodigal son.' He came to a similar point in his aimless wanderings. His life was at a dead end and he found himself staring into a vast nothingness. Of course, unlike the world-famous author who had great success and much wealth, this reckless youth had nothing; he squandered it all -- but he, too, had to surrender, to let go and return to his home and his father who acted more like a mother, waiting there for him with open arms. He was Israel being led out of Egypt

from exile and slavery into freedom. He echoed St. Paul's voice of remorse and restoration: *I have been mercifully treated because I acted out of ignorance in my unbelief.*

Acting out of ignorance or apathy or distraction or overwork – for us, I think, it's not a deliberate turning from God. It's simply inattention to the deep wellspring of love that's available to us each moment of each day. In the three gospel parables of the lost being found, we enter God's world, the depth of God's love in unconditional and complete forgiveness, God's mercy breaking through any of our human restrictions. That's the world we're invited to live in – all the time.

Today's gospel is filled with images of sheep and silver pieces and sons that have been lost, and the excessive joy that occurs when the lost is found. If you and I search our hearts honestly, there is probably something within each of us that has been lost when it comes to the strength of our faith, our energy to live the gospel, our union with Christ and our commitment to the Christian community. Hear the Lord calling you and me today in so many ways to come home, to return to the Source and Center of our lives, to put aside excuses and hesitations and find our way, like the prodigal son did, back to his Father's house. There's a warm welcome there awaiting each one of us.

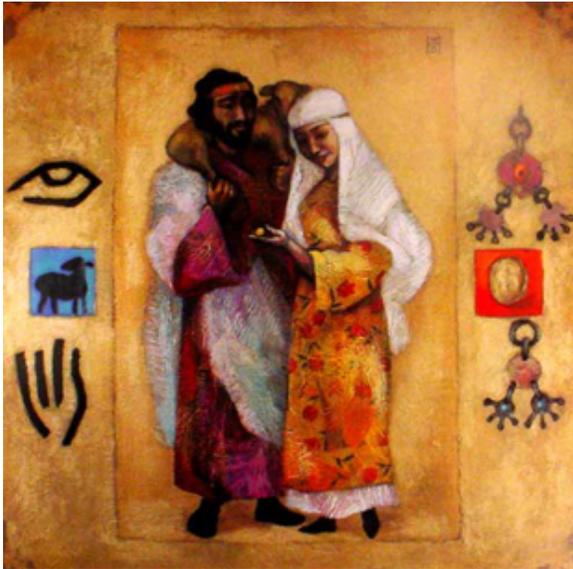


I would end this reflection here on a positive note, except that there's a postscript to Anne Rice and her journey of

faith that led her back to God. Only a few years after her public return to the Church and the religion of her childhood, Rice publicly renounced her dedication to the Catholic faith because of her disagreement over some of the social teachings of the Church. On her Facebook page she wrote: *Today I quit being a Christian. I remain committed to Christ, as always, but not to being "Christian" or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to "belong" to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else.* Her commitment to Christ remains at the heart and center of her life; she desires to be radically transformed in Christ. She can no longer abide by the institution of the Church as she perceives it. I was surprised and disappointed when I discovered this, after reading about her inspirational conversion to God and to Christ and her return to the Church over two decades ago.

For me there are a couple lessons to be learned and insights to be gained. First, each person is at a different spot on his or her journey of faith. On life's road there are crossroads and ditches, quiet country lanes and busy intersections, highway crashes and heavy traffic delays. We have to respect where each one of us is at along the path. Consider the three characters in today's gospel story: the father – patient, generous, stable, compassionate and wise; the younger son – impetuous, flighty, rebellious, foolhardy; the older son – hardworking and consistent, but self-righteous, mean-spirited, and cold. The rich story Jesus gave us contains all three. Each has to work out God's plan of salvation – in his own time, in his own life. God's grace is available to all of them as it is to each of us.

Second, we are the face of the Church. The institution and its hierarchy draw lines that include and exclude, deciding who's in and who's out. It's always been that way throughout the history of the Church. It's part of the role of any institution – to guard the borders. But we, in our daily living, in our local community and our parish interactions don't need to be that way. We can do our best, even within the institution, to reflect the open arms of God, the image of the father in the gospel whose embrace is extended to the ungrateful runaway and the self-righteous stay-at-home.



In response to an interviewer's question, "How do you follow Christ without a church?" Anne Rice replied: *"I think the basic ritual is simply prayer. It's talking to God, putting things in the hands of God, trusting that you're living in God's world and praying for God's guidance. And being absolutely faithful to the core principles of Jesus' teachings."* I think that's a good and honest response. I hope we can say the same while remaining members of the Church, participating in the Eucharist and the life of the community, and reflecting to the world around us the all-

embracing love of God which the author found lacking in her experience of the Church, but which we affirm and celebrate by our presence here today.

John Kasper, OSFS