

There's a lot going on in these passages – in the first, the fickle crowd take to worshipping a golden calf – or so it seems – rather than endure the long wait for Moses, in the psalm, the prayer in contrast is for 'a steadfast spirit', in Paul's letter to Timothy the leitmotif of all four readings comes into view ' *that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*' and in the final trilogy of parables we have the theme of God's love for what is lost – culminating in God's steadfast love for both the younger and the older sons – both fickle in their affections and behaviour, both sinful in their lack of a steadfast love. We don't know the result for the elder son, whether the father's words will win him over but we can be sure that the father will continue trying and that is the case for us all symbolised and affected in the sending of his son Jesus who pleads for us still at the right-hand of the Father. So God's dynamic doesn't change the problem remains with us as sinners, as a fickle brood, easily seduced into believing that God no longer loves us or that God does not exist – which I suggest amounts to the same thing – as we give up waiting for signs of God's love and go our own way, attempt to be self sufficient, attempt to build a world of our own, a world of passing luxuries of constant entertainment, a Fiddler's Paradise, where various gated communities or nation states vie with one another to live and reign forever, a world of deluded utopias which has less and less purchase on reality, a world in which the weather finally settles it all and we are reduced to wishing we can fill ' *our bellies with the husks the pigs were eating*' but in which no-one offers us anything, except that is for God. What is at issue then is not God's fidelity but our own – God's search for us is unending, as a parent for a child, as a woman for a lost coin, or a shepherd for a lost sheep, but do we want to be found? It is indeed our patience that is being tested here, our willingness that is to suffer God's apparent absence, to have hope still that, whatever we may have done, we will be found. A coin doesn't have much say in the matter, but sheep can bleat and recognise the sound and sight of their shepherd, and children know when someone is on their side, when someone loves them – though it can take time for such trust to be re-established. Our hope is that however wounded we are in this respect, however prone still to turn to sin the father or mother God continues to be there for us – some will know it and some not, and these stories are there to be told by those who have experienced this return, such as Paul, and myself, to those still in doubt. It is Good News, perhaps the only Good News we now have, and worth holding onto.

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