

COMMENTARY ON READINGS FOR SEPT. 12, 2004
(Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

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The message of this Sunday's readings is forgiveness. The first reading recounts Israel's original sin, the breaking of the First Commandment shortly after it was given! As had happened when evil and violence had multiplied on the earth in the time of Noah (Gen 6:5-22), God had second thoughts about having elected Israel, and wanted to start anew making a new people out of Moses. But Moses interceded for Israel, and God repented of the destruction he had threatened, as in the time of Noah. Ps 51 is the penitential (repentance) psalm par excellence, attributed to King David after his adultery-cum-murder with Bathsheba (talk about abuse of executive privilege!, see 2 Sam 11-12). He prayed for forgiveness and promised to be a good example for other sinners in need of repentance. In the second reading, Paul admits his guilt in the persecution of the Church, but explains the mercy shown to him as being for the revelation of the perfect, divine forbearance (or patience) of Jesus Christ. For Paul, the crux of the divine mystery is just that, God overlooking our sins in order to show how righteous he is; see Rom 3:21-26.

The gospel reading dramatizes the gist of Jesus' ministry and message, that in the End Time God would seek the stray and lost and bring them back to himself (which is the Hebrew meaning of "conversion" or repentance, coming back to God; see the "good shepherd" in Ezek 34:15-16, 23-31). Jesus is God's messianic agent for this. The parable of the "Prodigal Son" shows nothing of the threatening God of the first reading; it is the fearful, repentant but as yet unbelieving son who thinks he must prepare an appeasing speech to his father, whom he rightfully expects to be furious. But God the Father of Jesus is not like that; contrary to Oriental convention and propriety, this father runs to his son while he was still far off, and lavishes him with affection and gifts, with a party instead of probation. This End Time, Kingdom extravagance which we are called to practise ourselves (see Mark 4:3-9, the prodigal or profligate sower; Matt 20:1-16; John 12:3; 19:39) is often offensive to the "Pharisees" of then and now.