

The Second Sunday of Creation, The 13th Sunday after Trinity,
Exodus 32.7-14, Luke 15.1-10

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Dear brothers and sisters in faith,

Let me begin with a few words about Queen Elizabeth II and my deep sadness about her passing last week. I finished my sermon the day before she died. It is about our responsibility for God's creation and how we often do not take responsibility for it. As I reread my sermon, I realized that the Queen was a person who throughout her life took responsibility as she was charged to do. So my respect for this remarkable person continues to grow.

The older ones among us associate the number 9/11 with an event that has changed our worldview and our society. The attack on the World Trade Center 21 years ago today has clouded our outlook on life. To take a very practical example, it has meant that security checks at airports have become ever more cumbersome. And we have become aware that living together with people of other religions in our society has to be learned and practised.

In the meantime, not only have we got used to the security checks, but many initiatives between Muslims, Christians and Jews have also emerged in Austria to shape and foster a multi-religious society. While the crisis of 9/11 has not been forgotten, we have since been severely tested by new ones. There is the experience of the pandemic. Additionally, many are wondering what else is in store for us with the war in our neighbourhood, the influx of refugees triggered by it, the energy crisis, inflation and the nuclear threat, which has become more real for us again as the war has continued. In other parts of the world, people are afraid of the next famine or are already in the midst of one.

Crises, crises, and more crises, and I haven't even yet mentioned the climate catastrophe, which is increasingly affecting our lives and changing how we view the world. There is a real danger that you will close your ears and hearts if I talk about this now. But this is why I was invited to preach about during Creationtide and why I cannot remain silent about the responsibility we bear for this crisis.

There are various ways of facing the responsibilities that we struggle to cope with. The Old Testament reading shows us one way: you shift the responsibility onto someone else. God says to Moses, "Your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have acted perversely." (Ex 32:7) Moses, however, is not at a loss for words. He replies to God, "Oh, LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?" (v. 11) Moses returns the ball to God and we wonder, Who is now blaming whom? Who actually led the people of Israel out of Egypt? Was it Moses who acted on behalf of God? Or was it God himself who performed the miracle at the Red Sea? Who do the people of Israel belong to – God or Moses?

We are not the only ones who like to pass responsibility to others. As soon as there are problems, the people of Israel no longer want to know anything about God and turn to the Golden Calf. God is not slow to react, shifting the responsibility for the

people onto Moses. But Moses does not back down. He finds an important argument. He continues his conversation with God, reminding God of His honour and appeals to Him: "Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people.'" (v. 12)

This is a strong thing that Moses is asking God to do here. He is asking God to change his plans. No longer angry, he asks them to repent. Moses shows us another way of dealing with responsibility when it exceeds our capabilities. Moses makes himself the advocate of his people. He intercedes and reminds God of his promise: "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" (v. 13) Surely God cannot destroy and annihilate those whom He has promised He will multiply and allow to flourish! What an embarrassment that would be before the Egyptians! Moses does everything he can and intercedes with God so that God will change His mind.

In fact, another miracle happens, just as it happened at the Red Sea: despite the fact that the people of Israel have turned away from God and have elevated the Golden Calf as their new god, God does not carry out his plan to destroy this stiff-necked people. God himself repents and abandons his intention. He has the greatness to make Himself small. He turns back from his original intention.

And us? Are we as capable as God? Do we have the courage to turn back? Are we willing to make ourselves small? Do we intercede like Moses for our earth and its people?

For us, greed, success, profit and growth can become the Golden Calf. WE have been exploiting the earth and living beyond our means for years. Now we are paying the price. Due to the constant emission of CO₂, life on earth is becoming more and more like life in a pressure cooker. Warming leads to more storms, tempests and floods.

We ask ourselves: Will the rainbow continue to be the sign that heavy rain, floods and torrents will come to an end? Who will intercede for us before God, we having acted perversely? Who will go in search of us, we having lost the sense of what a good measure is? Who goes after us who are lost?

The two parables from Luke's Gospel tell of being lost. One parable comes from the world of men at the time. During Jesus' time they were responsible for the livestock outside. They sometimes had to fend off attacks by wolves or lions. But what is to be done when a sheep cannot be found? The shepherd goes in search of it and is happy when he finds it. The joy is so great that he invites his neighbours and friends to rejoice with him.

The other parable takes place in the world of women at that time, in the house. Here it is a coin that has been lost. It does not run away like a sheep, nor does it bleat to indicate where to look for it. In the house you require sufficient light if you want to find something. Here too, there is great joy when the coin is found and – as

the Greek text says – the woman invites her female neighbours and friends to join in the celebration and rejoice.

Jesus tells this story to the Pharisees and scribes. He makes it clear to them what is true from God's perspective for those people who are lost. At that time, it was the tax collectors and sinners, i.e. people who did not live their lives according to God's will. In Jesus' view, they do not remain excluded from salvation. Where sinners repent of their behaviour, there is great joy in heaven and with God's angels.

Once again I ask: Are we capable of repenting of our behaviour? Are we ready to repent and live in a way that corresponds to God's will, i.e. that the earth and everything that lives on it can live in the way God intends – now and in the future? Can we make ourselves small even though we could perhaps afford to live with a large CO2 footprint? Do we bring our concerns for the preservation of the earth in prayer before God and remind him of the promises he has made to us?

It is not easy for anyone to perceive themselves as sinners. It is not easy to accept that we are causing lasting damage through our lifestyle choices – damage to ourselves, to people who live far away and to the generations that will come after us. It is unpleasant to perceive that we ourselves have gone astray, worshipping the Golden Calf of greed and losing ourselves in the pursuit of growth, success and profit. Is there a God who goes in search of us?

There is a God who has set out and sought people out. He came into this world as a light. He has gone after people, especially the lost ones, the sinners and tax collectors, the sick and suffering. But this God depends on us to let ourselves be found by him and to be willing to repent. This God does not want us to continue to worship the Golden Calf of greed and covetousness. This God needs our willingness to be guided by his Spirit to just and fair sharing. This is for our salvation, our own and that of our fellow creatures. Through God's Spirit, we find the courage and strength to practise a lifestyle that is beneficial for us, for future generations and for all living beings on earth according to God's will. Amen.