

Small steps can take us home

To be immersed in Torah is to draw close to Jesus. At Vatican II, the Council Fathers recognized that our Old Testament scriptures come to us from and through the Jewish people; and that with their help we can come to a richer understanding of the scriptures which Jesus, as a faithful Jew, knew and prayed, loved and quoted.

For the Jews, Torah is treasured as their sacred text. And for Christians? Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) forms part of our sacred scriptures too. Together, Jews and Christians share this reverence for Torah and are committed to reading it on a regular basis. Just as the Christian Church has a schedule (lectionary) for reflecting on Scripture, so does Judaism have a lectionary for studying a portion of the Torah each week. Our reflections can enrich one another. Let me offer one example here.

As I write this, the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur ('Day of Atonement') approaches. The sabbath (Saturday) before this holy day is often called Shabbat Teshuva. In Hebrew, teshuva means 'repentance' (from the word shuva, 'return'). Repentance is also the focus of the Gospel story of the Prodigal Son which is read in Christian churches on designated Sundays of the year. Jews and Christians alike are called to a spirit of forgiveness

and repentance as they listen and respond to God's Word.

When we think of repenting, of 'returning' to God, it can all seem like hard work! We forget that God is already doing a lot of the work for us, desiring our return even more earnestly than our own fragile decision to come home. God can work wonders with even our weakest efforts. The way home may seem narrow, but God wants to enlarge it for us! A midrash (story) passed down through Jewish history reflects on the Song of Songs in these words: "'Open to me, my sister.' Rabbi Issi said: God says to the Israelites, open to me...the gate of repentance as minutely as the eye of a needle, and I will open for you gates wide enough for carriages and wagons to enter through them"[Cant.Rabbah].

At times the journey 'home' to God seems so far that we hesitate to even start. Yet we are not the only one covering the distance: God sets out to meet us. A poignant story comes to us through Jewish tradition:

"A king had a son who had gone astray from his father a journey of 100 days. His friends said to him, 'Return to your father'; he said: 'I cannot.' Then his father sent word to say, 'Return as far as you can, and I will come to you the rest of the way.' So God says, 'Return to me, and I will return to you' (Mal.3:7) [Pesikta Raba]."

What an uplifting story to bear in mind as we ponder the Gospel image of the father running

to meet the prodigal son. As Henri Nouwen, in *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, says: The question is not 'How do I find God?' But 'How am I to let myself be found by God?'

Think of a broken relationship in your life. Does it seem impossible to mend? Impossible to forgive? To be forgiven? To heal again? This week, take one small healing step, even if it is simply to pray for the desire to repent or to forgive; or perhaps to talk over the matter with a trusted friend. 'Return' as far as you can. Let God do the rest.

