

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Luke 15: 1-10 ("The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin")

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.' Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Praise the Lord with the sound of trumpet (CH: 169)

Just as I am (CH: 553a)

God is working his purpose out (CH: 235)

All my hope on God is founded (CH: 192)

Jesus would have counted his pennies: in the first century AD, he probably didn't have much of a choice. Life in that pre-scientific, pre-industrial, pre-modern era was very, very tough. Let's be clear: as the son of a carpenter, he would have known poverty. Not for Jesus a fleet of Ford Transits with the name "Joseph and Sons: Carpenters" emblazoned along the sides and back, above a handy mobile phone number and e-mail address. Instead, the family would have owned very basic tools with which to carve out the most fragile and basic of livings.

If you are looking for a rule of thumb in assessing who was well off and who was poor in those far distant days, you would look towards the land. If a person owned an estate with, say, a farmhouse, olive grove, vineyard, animals, servants and so on, they were quite obviously rich. If another person had a plot of land on which to grow some crops for the family and maybe a few for the market, they were a whole lot less prosperous. But if, like the great majority of people, you had no land whatsoever, that made you and your bag of third rate tools part of the peasant economy where every penny counted and where no meagre evening meal would ever be taken for granted. Poverty held sway over first century Israel-Palestine.

That, I would suspect, is precisely the reason why Jesus speaks of the lost sheep and the lost coin in the way that he does, because in his world where human life is permanently on the edge, every single resource is precious, every single sheep is valued, every single coin is a means of keeping body and soul together for one more precarious day. This is also the reason why the loss of a very simple possession would be seen as potentially catastrophic, whether to the shepherd on the hillside, or the woman with her broom, or to Jesus, or to his impoverished listeners. As parables go, parables involving material loss would have been easily grasped and readily understood from the commonplace trials of everyday Judean life.

Just think: exactly who were Jesus' listeners in our reading? We could split them into two very different groups ... with some wealthy members. First, we see that "tax collectors and other outcasts" were there because they wanted to hear what Jesus might say. By this stage in Luke's gospel, Jesus has built up quite a following, with people on the fringes of life taking a keen interest in what this compelling figure might teach about community and inclusion in the Kingdom of God. Many, including tax collectors, had been shunned by respectable society, but now here was someone who - by his lifestyle and his message - was able to show that he had no time for such petty respectabilities and trivial conventions. Outsiders were "in".

The second group of onlookers are really quite different. They are, of course, the grumbling scribes and Pharisees, whose devotion to the letter of The Law puts him well at odds with the teaching of this rebellious rabbi. As they look at Jesus, they see someone whose standards seem not only lax but dangerous too. He hangs out with those who are not clean ... not righteous ... not "us". These outcasts are the "them" of society: people whose way of living is to be deplored in the eyes of the religious law. And insofar as Jesus is willing to befriend such no-hopers, he effectively takes their detestable standards as his own. How could he welcome such vermin? How could he eat with such sewer rats? The fact that he did made him unclean too.

Of course, their mutterings reach the ears of Jesus, prompting him to teach them a lesson in grace - the very grace of God. Luke tells us that in response to what Jesus is hearing from his legalistic detractors, he turns to some parables, two of which we will think about today, with the third (the parable of the prodigal son) being one of the true gems of Christian theology, not to mention world literature. Together, these tiny nuggets of purest gold unpack the truth of God's yearning to find the lost.

And so we return to what we were saying a moment ago about the life-saving value of precious resources. If you or I were sheep farmers of ancient history, what would we do if we had discovered that 1% of our flock had gone astray? For two reasons we might not be that troubled. Bad things happen, after all, and we need to be prepared to take an occasional knock to the bank balance. We would look into what went wrong. We would put things right. But we might conclude that it was only one solitary, stupid sheep that went its own way - the other 99 are just fine.

Secondly, and maybe more importantly, why should *we*, responsible sheep farmers as we are, put the entire flock at terrible risk by deserting them to roam the dangerous hills and glens in search of one renegade animal who, for all we know, might already have been dragged off by wolves?

Perhaps in cold, hard economic terms that kind of a case might be made by the hard-nosed hill-farmer. But not for Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who loves each member of the flock and who sees the priceless value of every single sheep. It's not about profit and loss. It's about value and togetherness.

So too with that single silver coin. It doesn't matter that you still have nine of them left. Every last coin is a coin whose value you appreciate, so you will take your broom and you will sweep and sweep through the shadows and the cobwebs, into the nooks and crannies, until you hear the wonderful sound of bristle against metal.

And in finding the object that has gone missing, it's not just a matter of relief that - at long last! - you have recovered what you had lost. It is a cause of great celebration, with all that was missing now restored once more, and everything returned to where it should be - to where it *needs* to be.

There's one further point which bears consideration here: as with all parables, the objects involved are used by Jesus to make a point, but each object actually points far beyond itself. The story of the "ninety and nine" isn't really about a sheep at all. The tale of the worried woman brushing so frantically isn't to do with a coin, whether of silver or of gold. Each tale takes the listener towards a *divine* truth which needs to be revealed to those legal experts on the sidelines: God loves everyone. God loves tax collectors. God loves outcasts.

In short, *God's grace is there for all.*

The issue facing those heckling lawyers is also worthy of reflection. They are the ones who protest that Jesus is in the wrong circle. He's associating with the wrong people. And who, we might ask, would be the *right* people? Isn't it obvious? These legalists see *themselves* as the true experts in the fine art of keeping God on side ... or so they think. Yet in bringing all human life down to the level of legal obligation, they have forgotten what it is to lose and to search, to recover ... and to rejoice! Jesus is not about keeping to the strictures of absolute regulation. He is about *life*, and life in all its fullness. And so, in the end, the person of faith is pointed not to a life of unattainable perfection, but to a life of something else entirely. The Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen tells us what that certain *something* needs to be:

"Perhaps the most radical statement Jesus ever made is: 'Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate' (6:36). God's compassion is described by Jesus not simply to show me how willing God is to feel for me, or to forgive me my sins and offer me new life and happiness, but to invite me to become like God and *to show the same compassion to others as he is showing to me.*" [Emphasis added]

In returning to God, we are to show in our own lives the great mercy of God. Amen.

Praying for others

God who saves the lost,
we thank you for the inspiration which we receive from the parables of Jesus:
the shepherd who makes the effort to recover the missing sheep;
the householder who sweeps and sweeps until the tiny coin is found;
the father who rushes out to hug his wayward son in sheer joy.

These stories are simple yet profound.

May they guide us in our faith and in our living,
as we learn important lessons about being followers of Christ, your Son.
Give us, the people of this church, the courage to leave our comfort zones
to find those who are lost and lonely, bringing them to bright new hope.

May we never give up in our search for those in need,
doing our best to help them in their trials and their struggles.

And may all rejoice with you when one who has been lost
finds the security of your presence, with fresh hope restored and
new community found in the joy of Christ, our Redeemer.

In his Name we pray. Amen.

And finally ...

Robin Hill considers the challenges of Luke:

We are now approaching the end of our summer season on Luke's gospel. If you have been listening to our series of sermons or been reading through the book in your own time, I wonder what you make of his "line" on Jesus. Are you hearing and seeing pretty much what you had been expecting? Or are you a wee bit surprised at finding a divine mission which is so powerfully targeted at the world's "have nots" and a Jesus story which is just so inclusive of those "on the outside"? From week 1's humble shepherds on Bethlehem's plains by night, through those accounts of Jesus overcoming rejection (both of himself and of others) we meet someone who has both a determination to follow in God's path of selflessness and a willingness to bear the troubles of all whom he seeks to save.

But, I wonder, does Luke make you a little hot under the collar with his presentation of Jesus as the one whose message is so intentionally aimed at people of different viewpoints, different lifestyles, different ways of being? More than this, does the Jesus portrayed by Luke speak just a wee bit too personally to you about very sensitive issues such as wealth in an impoverished world and the "woes" entailed in having too many possessions?

At our our travels with Jesus approach his destination (Jerusalem and a cross which will bear the title "King of the Jews"), perhaps we might choose to pause and reflect upon these questions:

- ♦ who are we and who are we called to become?;
- ♦ what do we do with our faith and what do we prefer not even to attempt?; and,
- ♦ who or what is it that can lay claim to the lives we choose to live?