

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)

The gospel writer Luke has a passion for those who are lost. Throughout his writings he shows his readers that the newly emerging Christian faith isn't any kind of Jesus fan club or happy little band of like-minded thinkers. The Church, as Luke sees it, is deeply committed to looking out for human need and then dealing with that need, so bringing those who are left out of life into the very heart of the believing community. And in a society so greatly divided into "the haves" and "the have nots", that kind of humanitarian commitment is radical stuff.

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 there was very little prospect of financial security in any sense. Poverty of that most grinding sort would likely have enveloped Mary, Joseph and Jesus ... plus many, *many* others.

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. As parables go, those involving material loss would have been *readily* understood by those who had so few possessions.

In our reading this morning, who are Jesus' listeners? We could split them into two very distinct groups. First, we see "tax collectors and other outcasts" there that day because they want to hear what Jesus might have to 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 long been shunned by respectable society, but now here was someone who - by his lifestyle and his message - is able to show that he has no time for such petty respectabilities and trivial conventions. For Jesus, those lost outsiders are seen as "in", not "out".

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 put 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". The tax collectors and outcasts are rejected by smart society. They are folk whose way of living is to be deplored in the eyes of the religious lawyers. And insofar as Jesus is willing to befriend such no-hopers, he effectively takes their standards as his own. How *could* he welcome such human vermin??? (And, of course, the fact that he *does* makes Jesus unclean too.)

The mutterings of the scribes and Pharisees 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 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 and, indeed, world literature. Together, these tiny nuggets of pure gold unpack the truth of God's yearning to search out 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, what would we do if we had discovered that 1% of our flock had gone astray? For a couple of reasons we might not actually 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 for the future. But we might conclude that it was only *one solitary, stupid sheep* that went its own way - with other 99 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 mountains and valleys in search of one renegade animal who might already have been dragged off by wolves? Going to all that trouble would be daft!

Perhaps in cold, hard economic terms that kind of a case might be made by the hard-nosed hill-farmer. But not by 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 love and true value.*

And 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 got back 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 scrutiny here: as with all parables, the objects involved are used by Jesus *to make a point*, with each object pointing far beyond itself. The story of the shepherd and the "ninety and nine" isn't really about sheep at all. The tale of the worried woman brushing so frantically isn't to do with money. Each tale beautifully guides the listener towards *a heavenly truth* which needs to be revealed to those legal experts on the sidelines: God loves everyone. God loves tax collectors and outcasts. God's grace is there for *all*.

The issue facing those heckling lawyers is also worth a spot of reflection. They are the ones who protest that Jesus is in with the wrong circle. He's associating with the worst people. And who, we might ask, would be the *best* people? Isn't it obvious? These legalists are 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 plainly forgotten what it is to lose and to search ... to recover and to rejoice! Jesus is not about keeping to the confines 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' ... 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."

In being found, we are to show the great mercy of God to those who are lost. 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 have made 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 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?

As we find Jesus approaching his destination (Jerusalem and a cross which will bear the title, "King of the Jews") perhaps we might decide 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 claim to own the lives we choose to live?