

Sermon at St John's Church, Cambridge. Sunday 14th September 10am Revd. James Shakespeare

Two words to us this morning, one from our Gospel and another from the First Letter of St Paul to Timothy. From our Gospel, the shepherd says to his neighbours & friends, *'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'* + From St Paul; *'I received mercy, so that in me... Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe...'*

Today's theme is big & life-changing: forgiveness. Both for us, for those around us and for our world. And yet it's so subtle (this gift of forgiveness) & so much more dynamic than we often think, that I want to delve into what our Gospel is saying; recognising that God, in Christ, is part of all of our lives, moment-by-moment, as well as our service & relationships in God's world; & that we need (again & again) to give forgiveness another look, to see if there is something new that God may be saying to us. How much our world today, riven by conflict, needs forgiveness?

And what I want to do in particular, this morning, is to look at our Gospel stories from 3 different perspectives: that of the religious leaders (who resist Jesus), that of the penitent (the sinner who receives forgiveness) and that of God himself (who, we discover, seeks us out with unceasing love); for each of these perspectives have something powerful to say to us... After all, today's service is filled with powerful stories: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the witness of Paul's story, as he tells it (one who himself was lost and was found). And let's also not forget those other stories, not mentioned, that we need also to acknowledge: the parable of the prodigal son (later in Luke 15) and our own personal stories which are very much part of the drama too.

The scribes and the Pharisees (the religious leaders of the day) are clearly unhappy with the company Jesus is keeping, *'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'* Fancy that, they say, shouldn't he be spending time with the righteous people, rather than those with dubious reputations?

I remember, some years ago, being at an ecumenical gathering of ministers from across the town that I was then working in, and one of my colleagues, who was leader of the local Independent Church, told me that during the summer he had spent two weeks not with church people, but among those (in the wider community) with no church connection, many of whom has very negative perceptions of Christianity. Just as I too, in a different way, used to spend much time out on the street, working with Street Pastors, and serving as their Chaplain...

And, remarkably, out of my colleague's encounters, and an event they organised in the local park on the Bank Holiday, 25 new people visited their church, 5 of them coming to faith in Christ. +I can't help wondering, looking at our Gospel, Luke 15, that this is exactly what Jesus might have done – being with those outside the religious establishment, and right out on the margins.

We have to ask ourselves, as we think about the Pharisees, where would we be in the story, and whether our church radiates a gospel of forgiveness – where all are genuinely welcome and where we go out to practise God's gracious love – or the opposite? For God calls us to be the kind of community (in worship and hospitality and daily encounter) that radiates his love and forgiveness, that all might discover his love for them... Jesus, then, tells his parable to the likes of them, the Pharisees and, at times, us, to demonstrate – in dramatic terms – the true nature of divine forgiveness.

So what, then, about the perspective of the penitent (the sinner who receives forgiveness)? Interestingly, in today's gospel, we glimpse this not through a person, but through two powerful symbols, one animate and one inanimate: that of the lost sheep and the lost coin. And the idea here is precisely (however small & insignificant, to some, a single sheep within a large flock, or a small coin, may be) that these matter and are lost. The first step on the road to becoming fully human, to dignity, relationship and forgiveness is precisely this discovery that each of us matter infinitely to God; that we have value and are important to him, even (& perhaps especially) when we are lost.

Paul knew this too, as one who had formerly been a man of violence, a blasphemer and a sinner, and yet who (through his unexpected encounter with Jesus) discovered forgiveness and love... and so, slowly but surely, was able to repent and turn his life around: the sheep turning sheepdog.

The point about these parables is that we need to be shocked by them! Would you, having lost a 5 pence piece, turn your whole house over to find it? Of course not, even if there are other things that you would turn your house over to find! And yet we matter so much to God, that this is what he does for us, *'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'* For, *'There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.'*

So what, then, finally, about the perspective of God himself, about whose character we have already begun to glimpse? It's not what the religious leaders wanted to hear or what the outcasts expected, but the message is that God's desire to seek us out and grant forgiveness and new life is immeasurable. Like the woman searching for the lost coin and the tireless shepherd going out of his way to seek out the lost sheep, God is tireless is seeking out the lost.

Jesus doesn't stay within the safety or comfort of the familiar – the holy huddle or church or synagogue – but goes out to the outcast, the guilty and the forgotten, radiating the father's love.

He goes out into the highways and byways, into the public houses and amongst people of ill repute. He searches tirelessly among the crowd, seeking to bring home the lost. And if you want to picture the human face of God, look at the father of the prodigal son, who reaches out, with arms of love and compassion, to receive his wayward son home – and then throws a party, killing the fatted calf. For this, our return – our repentance and change of heart – is what makes him truly happy. *'There [is] more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.'*

The good news is that God loves each one of us too, whatever our experience of life, and indeed he cares for every human person (all those who live in our community), not just once in a lifetime, but season by season and moment by moment. And we need not only to repent, to examine our consciences and turn from all that harms us, but at the same time to open our hearts to receive and to share his utterly undeserved but radically liberating gift; as well as, in an increasingly violent & intolerant world, being merciful to others not like us, and fostering tolerance + non-violence.

And so, in radical trust, joy and simplicity of heart, we are all invited to journey deeply into God's transforming love – that all may discover, the peace of God, which passes all understanding; as well as the freedom of the sons & daughters of God – reconciled + at peace with one another, whatever their differences of points of view. For, as Isaiah reminds us, and GOD says to each & every one of us: *'You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.'* Amen