

## **‘Lost and Found’**

Readings: Ezekiel 34: 11 -16 & 31 and Luke 15: 1 -10

Imagine if we’d been around at the time of Jesus – I wonder how we might have reacted to him. Well I think most self-respecting people of the time would have thought of him as a good person but what didn’t seem to make sense to them though, was how he seemed to go out of his way to make friends with those who many considered to be of doubtful reputation – tax collectors and ‘sinners’ and the like - those who somehow just didn’t seem to fit in with the mainstream of society.

Now if Jesus had gone round preaching at them and rebuking them they’d have probably thought that was OK, maybe expected, even applauded. But sitting around a table with them telling stories, and enjoying life together? Well that was something altogether different - it was shocking and disgraceful, tabloid stuff not the sort of behaviour expected of a respectable Jewish rabbi.

And it’s this that comes to a head in our gospel reading this morning. A crowd are gathering around Jesus and are really keen to hear all he has to say. Most of them are really excited about him - but then there a few others; those from the religious establishment, such as the Pharisees who are far from happy with him. And if we’d been there we may have heard them grumbling and muttering about him.

“This Jesus” they were saying “well he welcomes sinners and he even eats with them and treats them like old friends – it’s not right.” They just couldn’t handle it especially as this was a culture in which to eat with someone was to identify with them. And so there was a tendency for the ordinary people to avoid being seen eating with those thought of as sinners for fear of being tainted by association. And it’s this that triggers the story that Jesus tells of a sheep that gets lost. But I’ll come to that in a bit.

Clearly Jesus is ruffling a few feathers here - but then his mission was all about grace and healing and wholeness and setting the captives free. But the problem with the prevailing religious tradition (which the Pharisees were all about) was that it was doing just the opposite and stifling the life out of people. It had become fossilised and encrusted with all sorts of rules and regulations. And the OT law that had really been meant as a gift of God had been turned by the religious authorities into a symbol of bondage and oppression.

Rules and regulations and the Pharisees were fanatical about them. Rules about this and about that – rules about everything from washing your hands to loading camels. But the Pharisees had this mindset that to please God and be righteous you had to strictly follow these rules but it was misplaced – as it was a self-righteousness not the righteousness that God was looking for.

And this comes out in our reading this morning in the way we see the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law full of their own superiority and self-righteousness looking down their noses at those Jesus was befriending who they thought of as sinners.

If we flick over a few pages, we find the issue coming up again. And this time Jesus tells them the story of two men who go up to the temple one day to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. And the Pharisee makes a big song and dance about it all and prays about himself and how good he is: “Oh God, I thank you that I am not like other men – or like this tax collector here.” Meanwhile the tax collector slumps down in the shadows somewhere with his face in his hands and not daring to look up and prays: “Oh God, have mercy on me. Forgive me a sinner.” And you know what? It was not the Pharisee who went home in right relationship with God – no it was the tax collector.

We may really struggle to get our heads around this nit picking mindset of the Pharisees as we live in a very different culture to the one they did. But perhaps we ought to just pause a little before we come down too hard on them as inside each one of us there can be that little Pharisee trying to get out. And it’s a point which Judah Smith raises in his book ‘Jesus is.’ Often, maybe even sub-consciously, we make up laws or rules to justify our own way of life and then use them to compare ourselves with others.

Well sadly the problem of these Hebrew leaders was their unwillingness to acknowledge before a Holy God that they were in just as much in need of his mercy and forgiveness as the poor tax collector in the parable. And it can be the same for us too: ‘All we like sheep have gone astray’ says the Scriptures - each one of us – ‘we have each turned to our own way.’

And it’s this image of the Shepherd of Israel that Jesus taps into in telling this story of a sheep that wanders off and gets itself lost. It’s a story that would have immediately conjured up one of the recurring themes of the Old Testament in the minds of his Jewish hearers - just think of Psalm 23 ‘The Lord is my Shepherd.’

When we appreciate how much this imagery of the shepherd and sheep meant spiritually to the people of God over generations it becomes clear that this parable is much more than an example of someone rejoicing over the recovery of something that was lost.

But before we come to that let’s look at some of the others in the crowd intent on listening to Jesus. These were the outcasts, the marginalised and those the Pharisees thought of as ‘sinners.’ These were the ones who were drawn to Jesus and felt the warmth of his presence. Unlike the Pharisees they knew they were sinners and had a deep sense of their own unworthiness but he gave them hope. They found when they were with him they didn’t feel judged in the same way they felt with the Pharisees. They felt valued by him and - yes Jesus welcomes them and befriends them but that does not mean he endorses their way of life.

It’s not as though, when we come to Jesus we then just carry on as before. No - Jesus is in the business of transformation and we see examples of that in people such as Matthew

and Zacchaeus who were both tax collectors but who both have an encounter with Jesus and are completely changed and transformed.

And for those in the crowd who felt that life had dealt them a poor hand, Jesus likens them to a dumb sheep that somehow has got itself lost from the rest of the flock and landed itself in the middle of nowhere without any hope of getting home on its own. It's not unusual is it - to be out walking in the countryside somewhere and come across a sheep or sheep that have got through a gap in the fence and can't find their way back to the rest of the flock.

And in the story we have a sheep that's wandered off and realising that it's missing, the shepherd has no hesitation in going out looking for it. Now I know next to nothing about sheep but I'm given to understand that if a sheep is taken away from its flock and put in a separate place it can easily become disorientated. And so in the story, rather trying to guide the sheep home on its own four legs, we have this wonderful picture of the shepherd lovingly picking it up and carrying it home on his shoulders.

I wonder if we can see ourselves in this story. Are there times when we have felt lost?

We just seem to have lost our spiritual bearings and God seems very distant.

I recall an occasion sometime back when I was out with the Healing on the Streets team in the North Bay area and I was talking to a youngish man who was quite happy to engage in conversation but clearly considered himself to be lost and beyond reach. I asked if he would like us to pray with him but sadly he declined and couldn't be persuaded otherwise as he remained adamant that he had gone beyond the point where God could help him.

But what this parable says to me is that if we are lost and cry out to him he comes looking for us and he hears even the faintest cry. To me it brings to mind some words from Psalm 61 which is one I often turn to.

'Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For you have been my refuge, a strong tower against the foe.'

And one of the things that Jesus says in the gospels is that one of the reasons he came was to seek and save those who are lost. And perhaps I can finish by saying that that gives us such a wonderful assurance that when no one else can reach us, Jesus is the one who can find us. I'm sure you will recognise some of the words from one of our most popular hymns which we have all probably sung many times before: I once was lost but now am found was blind but now I see.' And when we think of the Lord Jesus and all he went through for us, his grace certainly is amazing. Amen.

Philip Newell (Reader)

Sermon preached at a service of Morning Worship at St Laurence's Scalby on Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> September 2019.