

Luke 15.1-10 – The Lost Sheep

I'm a big fan of YouTube, especially the really wacky and off the wall videos. One of my all time favourites is the video with the LED sheep. Have you seen it? It was done by a group of hill farmers in Wales who decided to get their sheep dogs to round up the sheep on one side of a valley in all kinds of creative ways, and then film it from the other side of the valley. They do all sorts of pictures but the best bit of the whole video is when it gets dark and they fit LED lights onto the sheep. They release the sheep dog who goes tearing up the hill towards the group of sheep who then scatter in a pre-arranged way so that it looks like a firework display. They set it to music, the 1812 overture, and it's just fantastic. Look it up tonight when you get home it'll have you creased over with laughter. It's brilliant!

Very often in the Bible, passages issue a challenge both to us as individuals and to us as a Church. And we are told in this passage how Jesus teaches the Scribes and Pharisees about how God searches for those that are lost using the image of lost sheep and a lost coin. The scribes and Pharisees are indignant because Jesus is spending time with those whom they deemed to be sinners, people who didn't keep the Law and who therefore should be avoided. Now, the Scribes and the Pharisees are often painted in a bad light in the Gospels, but I think that you have to feel sorry for them a little bit. After all they were living in an occupied territory, trying to keep the Covenant in a land which was occupied by the pagan Roman army. As so often happens, when they were faced with danger from outside, as a group they retreated into themselves and became very concerned with their own practices and customs. In this way they not only sought to honour God but also to mark themselves out as a Jewish nation amongst the pagan Romans. What Jesus is doing is taking an image from their everyday experience, in this case a shepherd and a woman looking for a lost coin, and using it to explain a theological point. This passage tells us a lot about God; it tells us about God's almost reckless love for us. It would be very reckless of a shepherd to leave 99 sheep and look for one sheep that had got lost, but that is what happens in the parable and that is what happens with God. Although it would be easy to focus on the seeming abandonment of ninety nine sheep in favour of one, that isn't the point of the parable. The point is that the shepherd searches out the lost sheep. This is why Jesus follows this parable up straight away with a parable about searching for the lost coin.

There was a rather superb Protestant Theologian from Germany called Eta Linneman, who died not that long ago. In one of her books she writes about the parable of the Lost Sheep and points out how, in Luke, which we have just heard, Jesus says that the Shepherd seeks after the lost sheep “until he finds it”, the finding is taken as certain. We can be certain that God is searching for us, and won't stop until he finds us. But then notice, after the sheep has been found, what does the shepherd do? He carries the sheep back to the flock. The care doesn't stop with the finding of the one that was lost, otherwise what would be the point of searching in the first place? The sheep is laid across the shoulders of the shepherd and carried back to where it will be safe. And there is rejoicing afterwards.

In today's world we can indeed feel very lost indeed, and I think this has always been the way. We turn on the news and most of the stories are negative, no matter what our taste in music it always seems like everything in the charts is another type. Technology develops so rapidly that it can leave us behind very quickly. A lot of people we meet can seem stressed, or in too much of a rush to say “hello”. There are a lot of things which can have our heads swimming and leave us feeling very lost indeed. I think people have always felt like this, I don't believe for one minute that it is in any way a new thing.

This week I was privileged to accompany some people from the minster in taking

Holy Communion to one of the nursing homes in the area. If I ever wanted an image of God's continuing searching, and caring, for those he loves, then I found it there. In front of an old, fairly clapped-out electric organ, on one of those wheeled tables which can roll next to a bed which we were using as a communion table, was the small wooden cross and the wafers and wine. In a room where many of the occupants were suffering with varying degrees of dementia, there was a symbol of God himself. Always searching, always caring.

So God searches for us, and then the question we have to ask ourselves then is "so how do we respond to that as a church"? I think that the answer is that if God is searching then we need to be as well. One of the charges placed on Deacons when they are ordained is to "seek out the lost of the world". To seek out the lost of the world. That isn't something which is just meant for those of us who have been ordained, it's a pattern for all of us to follow. This is where God gives us the challenge. Finding something of great value is a wonderful feeling, we feel special, we feel lucky, we feel like we want to rejoice. "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours, saying with them rejoice with me". If we search, we find. If we find we rejoice. When we rejoice, we share in the rejoicing of heaven. God searches for the lost, so we search for the lost. God rejoices when the lost are found, so we rejoice when the lost are found. Not **if** the lost are found, but **when**. It's one of God's promises to us.

We'll see the symbol of that promise in a few moments, when we share Communion together. A symbol of the love God has for us, what was lost and is now found, and can never be lost again.

Amen.