

The Lost

15 9 13

O Lord, we beseech you mercifully to hear the prayers
of your people who call upon you:
and grant that they may both perceive and know
what things they ought to do,
and may also have the grace and power
faithfully to fulfil them.

Our text today may be found in Luke chapter 15 and verse 2:

'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

If I were to ask you what is your favourite parable, what would you say ?

There are lots from which to choose and people's favourites will, understandably, differ. But this morning, we're going to look at two short parables that immediately precede one of the very best and most richly complex of stories that Jesus told – that of 'The Prodigal Son'.

The two parables are: 'The Lost Sheep' and 'The Lost Coin'. Curiously, the Good News Bible (1976) calls 'The Prodigal Son' 'The Lost Son' in order to emphasise the connection between the three. To understand what Jesus is saying, they are best read as a whole, a triplet of teaching ! The theme is about that which was lost being found: the sheep; the coin; the son. The shepherd finds his lost lamb;

the woman her lost silver denarius; the father his boy who'd gone astray. And there's a party to celebrate.

What 'The Lost Sheep' and 'The Lost Coin' have in common is the lengths that the shepherd and the woman are prepared to go to in order to find what has value in their eyes. The shepherd goes off to find his sheep that's gone and got itself lost – the French word is *égaré*. The woman lights a lamp and sweeps the floor. Perhaps, it's the cry of the sheep, its forlorn bleating, that tells the shepherd where it is. Perhaps, it's the glint of light or the tinkle as it's moved that alerts the woman. In 'The Prodigal Son', the father is actually watching the road along which his boy once left home and he sees him when he is still far off and he rushes out to greet him with a hug.

Okay, so they are, all three, great stories. But if we are to understand the message, we need to pay attention to the context in which they're told and hence today's text: **'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'**

Now, don't you love it: as ever, the Pharisees are not impressed with Jesus. The reason – because the folk who are flocking to hear Jesus preach and teach are tax collectors and sinners. Instead of turning them away, Jesus is actually welcoming them and sitting down and eating with them. Scandalous ! Outrageous !! How very shocking !!! You may recall that the name, Pharisee, means separated ones and a Pharisee's idea of being a good Jew was to be a Jew who separated himself from all that was unclean and impure, all that was sinful and bad: whether that be pork or sinful people like tax collectors. And in case you are interested in what

might define a sinful person in their eyes, then John's gospel chapter 7 and verse 49 gives us a neat definition. Here an unnamed Pharisee says 'this crowd, which does not know the law - they are accursed.' Simply, to a Pharisee, sinners are the vast majority of folk who are ignorant of the law. The uniformed are sinful so that I guess means you and me too !

So what 'The Lost Sheep', 'The Lost Coin' and 'the Lost Son' all illustrate is the fact that God does not give up on us but he is searching for us and wanting us to come back home to him. The boy comes to his senses and makes his way home. The sheep calls to the shepherd and is rescued. The coin somehow draws attention to itself by reflecting the light of the lamp or by making a sound as the brush moves it. The sinner repents and God welcomes him home and the angels rejoice in heaven.

Oh and there is a joke at the end of 'The Lost Sheep' in case you missed it. The difference between irony and sarcasm is the former can easily be missed whereas the latter is always obvious. Sarcasm is saying one thing and meaning the opposite and there is no doubt about what is intended. Irony, on the other hand, is subtle and can be read two ways. When Jesus says 'ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance', it sounds as if he is being nice to the nasty Pharisees, acknowledging their state of purity under the law which they've achieved by their own real effort. But perhaps 'ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance' should have a big NOT after it, for Jesus is subtly reminding us that all have sinned and fallen short of the requirements of the law.

So I think we can smile when we read these parables because we are reminded of a precious truth: that though we are all sinful and we all need to repent, God still loves each one of us and is looking for us to come back to him. And when we do, it's party time in heaven. Good or what ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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