

## **15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost 2023 Matthew 18:10-20. The Sheep who strayed**

Today we look at the well-known parable of the sheep who went astray. It paints a picture so easy to understand and so beautiful to ponder.

Now when Luke tells the story, it is in his chapter on the lost things; the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost or prodigal son (Luke 15). Here the focus is on the lost being found.

Matthew doesn't use the word 'lost' but 'strayed.' So today we are looking less at the evangelistic side of this parable – how the lost are saved; but the pastoral – how those who have strayed are sought out, cared for and loved.

Over the last six weeks we have seen in our readings that Jesus is teaching and showing the disciples what the future church will be like. What Jesus now calls "my church" (Matt 16:18).

In today's reading the sheep who have strayed and can't get home are members of Jesus' Church (Jesus' people) and are now lost. All of us are lambs who have strayed. So today's reading puts us in both positions, I think; the ninety-nine who have not strayed, and the one who has.

To understand this passage we need to go back 10 verses to the beginning of the chapter which puts today's reading in context.

The chapter begins with the disciples asking Jesus who will be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus replies and says unless you become like little children, you can't enter the Kingdom of heaven; *whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me* (18:8).

These little ones open today's passage. Our passage today begins with these little ones. "Take care that you do not despise these little ones," it begins. We can't help thinking from the context that Jesus is warning them, despite all they have seen and heard, they are not greater in the eyes of God than 'these little ones.'

The little ones Jesus is talking about in today's passage are the lost sheep in his church, his people. Here is the thing: not all Christians go to church! They have either stopped going to church at all or come to church but don't actually feel part of any flock and are not really there in their minds or their spirit.

This does not mean they are lost in terms of salvation, but rather need some special attention like only the Good Shepherd can provide, who leaves the rest of the flock on the safe mountains and goes to search for the one who is the apple of his eye in the shadows of the valleys.

When read this way; this parable can make pretty uncomfortable reading for we believers who perhaps have become a little complacent in our church going and have forgotten why

we gather in the first place. Not at all to flaunt our goodness; but to celebrate that we were lost but have now been found. All of us are, or once were, this one!

There are a few things to ponder here in this gem of a parable.

Firstly, the lost sheep is a single thing lost out of a larger group. One Sheep out of a hundred. God's gaze rests on every individual, even though we are one of many. God's concern for the many is made up of God's concern for every single individual – in the parable it is the single sheep whose importance to our Lord is only highlighted further by the effort made to find it.

However, just as in the Kingdom of God, once the lost thing is found – it immediately becomes part of the greater whole. It doesn't ever lose its unique 'oneness', but as part of the greater group it contributes to something of infinitely greater value. One hundred sheep have greater value than one sheep.

One of the strangest things we see in the mystery and miracle of salvation is that we can only be found by Jesus as a single sheep. Yet when we are found we immediately become part of a larger family group – the body of Christ. This is why we can say prior to Holy Communion, 'As this bread was once many grains which have been gathered together and made one bread: so may your church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.'

The second point is the effort put in to finding the one who strayed. What if the shepherd had thought 'it's only one sheep, I have ninety-nine others, maybe it will come back on its own.' Our Lord certainly doesn't think like that.

We are so important to him that he literally moves heaven and earth so we may be found. He came to earth in human form – God himself as shepherd and servant to find us. The shepherd in the parable goes even further into the wilderness. Everything stops until the "little one", the lamb, is found – that is the priority over everything else.

Thirdly, the shepherd celebrates! He rejoices over it more than the ninety-nine that never went astray. The will of God is that not one single sheep should be lost. Not one single soul. All the sheep given to Jesus, the good shepherd, by God, will be found.

John's gospel tells us that we don't find Jesus, Jesus finds us. Jesus says in John 15, "you did not choose me, but I chose you." A lost sheep can't find itself. This is wonderful news. We all were lost sheep, and we were found by Christ.

And just as importantly, God does not make any judgment on why the sheep is lost, he just goes out to find it. Perhaps the sheep has got lost by accident. Perhaps the sheep has done something really stupid that has separated it from the flock. It doesn't matter to God – a lost sheep is a lost sheep, and it needs finding.

So whether we have gone astray due to horrible circumstances of life or whether we have done something really stupid we think surely must have separated us from the love and grace of God, it doesn't matter to Jesus; he will come and find us without any judgment at all because God loves each one of us beyond anything that we can imagine, and it is not his will "that one of these little ones should be lost" (v.14).

When a Christian is restored to the church, or strengthened in faith, the whole of heaven rejoices at that. When you return to the Lord, when I return to the Lord, the whole of heaven rejoices.

And that's something we remind ourselves of each week in the Great Thanksgiving when we say: "Therefore with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven, we proclaim your great and glorious name, forever praising you and saying..." These are not just poetic words! This is the description of a spiritual reality that is being acted out this morning here, and all over the earth and in heaven.

So this is a short parable, but it has so much to teach us. We are reminded that each one of us has a responsibility for each other: that we are not to despise those who express their faith differently from us, that we are not to judge others for being weaker in faith or judge those who may have something in their past of which they are ashamed.

That kind of attitude does not reflect the loving heart of God. We are reminded that God loves each one of us so much that he has angels in heaven looking out for us (!! ) and guarding us as we walk through life. We are reminded that, no matter where we are in life, God will seek us out if we are feeling lost; no matter who you are or how you got lost in the first place. We are reminded that, when we return to God or when we are found by him, the whole of heaven rejoices.

It's a beautiful passage, and a beautiful expression of God's love and care for you. Let me pray...