

Proper 19 Year C 2022 (RCL)

Lost and found.

In the verse immediately before today's Gospel reading begins, Jesus says 'Those who have ears to hear, let them hear'. And here are those who have come to listen - the tax collectors and sinners. They gather round eager to hear what Jesus has to say - and he not only talks to them, he eats with them. Always quick to criticise, the Pharisees grumble against him - 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them'. We mustn't be too quick to condemn them. They love God and long for the coming of the Messiah to redeem Israel. Towards that end, their role was to study, obey, interpret and apply the Law of Moses. Keeping the law would prepare the way for the coming redemption; and since sinners were by definition law-breakers, they stood in the way of that redemption. That is what made Jesus' table-fellowship so offensive - he was associating with those whose very existence was anathema to all they stood for. Even their name tells us that - Pharisee - the separated ones; they don't need to listen to Jesus because they have the law - that is sufficient. Jesus invites them to step out of their self-enclosed, law-shaped box and imagine themselves in someone else's shoes.

'Which of you, having a hundred sheep, and losing one of them . . . . 'The shepherd brings his flock to the sheep fold at the end of the day, and counts them in. One is missing. What is he to do? Could a Pharisee even imagine himself as a shepherd, someone by definition a sinner because of the nature of his work - how Jewish Christians must have struggled with Luke telling them that the first people to be told of the birth of Jesus were shepherds - but I digress. Listen, have ears to hear, a sheep is lost. What are you going to do? Obviously, Jesus tells them, you go and look for it. You search diligently, not just scanning the field, but searching every bush - and when you find it, you don't tell it how stupid, wicked and inconvenient it has been, you carry it home - and then, you invite everyone to rejoice - you throw a party. That might cost you more than the value of the sheep but that doesn't matter - one lost sheep returned to the fold is worth celebrating. Could the Pharisees see their way to acting like this shepherd? Can they rejoice that the tax collectors and sinners have come to listen to Jesus? Or are they so locked in their self-made box that they cannot get out? And then another challenge - can they put themselves into the shoes of a woman? These men would have thanked God every day

that they had not been born in the body of a woman. It is the one and only time in the Gospels that Jesus tells a parable where the God figure is a woman - a woman desperate for something - someone - whom she treasures and who is lost. 'Or what woman?' he asks. This woman, like the shepherd is seeking that which is lost. The sheep, paralysed in lonely fear, cannot call for the shepherd, for the wolf might hear; the coin cannot of course try to attract attention - it doesn't even realise that it is lost. The lost can do nothing to help themselves - they need the one who is searching for them in order to be found.

Jesus sits at the table with tax collectors and sinners and points out to the Pharisees that these people need to be found, to be let back into the sheep fold or embraced by the distressed woman. They should not be condemned but be told that they are loved by God, by God who is seeking for them, searching for them, God who rejoices in finding them, bringing them home, making party for them and for everyone around them; this is a joy for all not a private celebration. God will go on seeking and searching 'until he finds them' - there is no giving up. Whether it is one in ten or one in a hundred, or even one in a million, God will

continue to seek and search until every last one of his children is found, made secure and celebrated.

Jesus is calling the Pharisees and scribes to join him in his search for the lost and in his joy in finding them as they come to listen.

These two parables, and the one that follows (the story of the father who had two sons) are about losing, searching, finding, restoring and celebrating the return of what was lost. The parables turn the complaint of the Pharisees and scribes into a celebration - 'this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them' - isn't that wonderful? Jesus is acting out God's gracious and determined search for those who are lost - until he finds them. They don't come seeking God - he goes looking for them, and when they are found the joy reaches to heaven. Where is the repentance in this? Surely it is the willingness to come close and listen, and to experience the joy of being found. In these parables Jesus is inviting the Pharisees to join him in searching for the lost, in valuing them, rejoicing over them, welcoming them into God's family (of which, of course, they are already members) and enjoying table-fellowship with them, those they had rejected.

St Paul will be at that table, the one which welcomes tax collectors and sinners - he tells us so himself - 'I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, a man of violence, but I received mercy'. He knew how it felt to be sought out, picked up, carried home and rejoiced over. 'This saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners'.

Do our churches feel like that? Places where the table is set to welcome tax collectors and sinners, however we describe the marginalised today - or are only the Pharisees, the separated ones, the self-righteous, the pure and holy, welcome at this table? The Pharisees saw repentance as a precondition of hospitality. Jesus saw things the other way around - hospitality as an invitation (an unconditional invitation) to repentance. In both parables the argument is simply expounded; granted that it is God's desire and plan that the lost should be saved, then Jesus' pastoral strategy of associating with sinners is fully justified because it earths God's redeeming activity. I am reminded of the command Jesus gives at the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan - go and do likewise.