

THAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH SHEEP....

I saw a video on Facebook once of a farmer saving a sheep. It had got itself stuck in a ditch and so he hoisted it out, and finding its feet, it scarppered away, free as a bird. Only to fall right back into the ditch a few yards further on! Aren't we so like sheep?

There is lots in the Bible about sheep – and shepherds.

This morning's reading in Morning Prayer was from Luke 15. It was the first two of the parables of "lost things". A sheep, a coin, a prodigal son.

This is an important teaching. Because we are all lost.

"For all fall short of the glory of God" Paul told the Roman church (Romans 3:23). "For we all are like sheep who have gone astray" (Isaiah 52:3), the prophet proclaimed.

I was speaking about the Good News of the Gospel yesterday and summed it up in two promises that Jesus made.

- *Life in abundance with him (John 10:10)*
- *Life eternal (John 3:16)*

Both mean that we were made to be with God and to be followers of his Son.

Without Him, we are lost.

Dictionary definitions of "lost" include these words –

- **Misplaced** – not where we should be
- **Disoriented** – not facing the right way or going in the right direction
- **Wasted** – missing out on opportunities (i.e. what we were made for – to be in Christ)
- **Absorbed** – wrapped up in something (e.g. the lies and temptations of the world)
- **Ruin** – original purpose being marred and /or destroyed in some way

In the parable, the shepherd (Jesus himself), leaves the 99 to go seek out the lost sheep. Away from the shepherd the lost sheep is indeed misplaced, disoriented, wasted, absorbed and ruined. Jesus was answering a complaint from the pharisees that he spent his time with tax collectors and other outcasts, even eating with them. To them these people were lost and beyond redemption. They were to be shunned and excluded.

Jesus, portraying himself as the good shepherd, says otherwise. Far from being abandoned to their fate, away from the flock, the shepherd goes out to seek the lost one (s) out. Finding them, he places the sheep on his neck, and carries them back to the flock, that now completes the 100.

It's a beautiful image. The shepherd carrying the lost back to where they are no longer lost – in the flock with the others, and with him, where the sheep was meant to be.

And not only can the good shepherd be content with a task well done – finding the lost sheep. There is celebration and joy in heaven. And here Jesus makes clear who the lost sheep are that he is referring to - a sinner. One separated from God by thoughts and actions that are not of God.

And what is it that brings them back into the fold? What is the solution to sin?
Repentance. Turning away from the sin and turning to God.

Proclaiming Jesus as Lord and making a commitment to turn to him and seek to obey his righteous ways – things that make us right with him. We are saved by grace, the works of Jesus who died on the cross for us. All his doing, not what we do.

But we respond in repentance.

When I was a curate we went to training (called IME) once a month. Now, Southwark is a very diverse Diocese with the whole spectrum of theological viewpoints reflected. So we got through the three years by NOT spending too much on the areas of contention. It would not have been fruitful!

Surprisingly there was one session that did split the room. It was pastoral care – which you might think was a fairly uncontroversial subject!

On one side of the room was the view that pastoral care was all about taking care of people's needs – listening, visiting, being alongside, feeding, offering shelter etc. The quote was “preach the Gospel, use words if you have to” (never actually said by St Francis by the way!)

On the other side was a view that without evangelising and getting people to make a commitment to faith their very souls were in peril – they were in fact lost. Therefore the best pastoral care was to preach the Gospel and make more disciples.

I came away somewhere in the middle – which it is both/and. Both are important.

We offer care for the here and now (Jesus' life in abundance) and we seek to bring people into the kingdom by faith (Jesus' eternal life).

We might weep for the state of the world and the suffering and difficulties that people face. We should pray *for* them and if we can *with* them (it is the Christian distinctive).

But we also need to weep for the lost. Those who do not know him.

There are five marks of mission. The third is very important – offering loving care.

But in many ways the first is the most important.

To bring people to a living faith of repentance and obedience.

Therein lies life forever.

We can alleviate suffering and pray for peace in the here and now.

But the lost sheep brought back into the fold with the shepherd is a gate to eternity and perfection.

No wonder there is a party in heaven!

Let's give them more to celebrate, from here in Sanderstead!

Amen.

Your brother in Christ

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