

Sunday 5th September 2004, Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost Rob Lamerton

Sunday 12th September 2004, Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost Rob Lamerton

Readings:

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

Psalm 14

1 Timothy 1:1-2, 12-19

Luke 15:1-10

Eduard Schweizer asked the question: "Where is Jesus in this parable?"

In the story of the shepherd and the sheep, it is the Shepherd himself who searches ...

In the story of the coin it is the owner who searches...

In the story of the prodigal son there is no intermediary --- the son goes straight to the father.

Where, indeed, does Jesus fit in these stories?

Do we need a mediator?

The answer is that the parables are a commentary on what Jesus **is** doing --- seeking out and saving the lost!

The context in which Jesus tells the stories indicates that he is indeed the agent of their message --- the mediator!

It is still in the process of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the cross, and we find tax collectors and sinners coming to listen to Jesus...

tax collectors: --- not well regarded because they helped the hated Romans in the administration of the conquered territory and enriched themselves at the expense of their countrymen. ostracized and outcast!

sinners: were the immoral, or those who followed occupations which were regarded as incompatible with the law.

[the following is thanks to William Barclay.]

The Pharisees and teachers of the law objected to Jesus mixing with such people and there was an old rule about not associating with an ungodly man. The Rabbis evidently took this so seriously that they could not associate with such a person **even to teach the law!**

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were further distressed to know that Jesus even **ate** with these people --- this implied an even greater acceptance, welcome and recognition.

As we have seen, these parables were set in definite situations!

The pharisees gave a name to those who did not practice the keeping of the Law --- there were called "The People of the Land" --- and the barrier between the Pharisees and the People of the Land was complete.

Pharisaic regulations said "When a man is one of the People of the Land, entrust no money to him, take no testimony from him, trust him with no secret. Do not make him the guardian of an orphan, do not make him the custodian of a charitable fund, do not accompany him on a journey."

So they were shocked by Jesus mixing with them. Now, whereas Jesus said: "there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents", the strict Jew said: "There will be great joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God."

So... Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep and the joy of the discovery --- The Shepherd in Judea had a difficult and dangerous task. Pasture was scarce and the narrow central plateau was only a few kilometres wide, cliffs falling down to the desert... without restraining fences, the sheep would wander.

George Adam Smith wrote:

"On some high moor across which the hyenas howl, when you meet him, sleepless, far-sighted, weather beaten, armed, leaning on his staff and looking out over his scattered sheep, every one of them on his heart, you understand why the shepherd of Judea sprang to the front in his people's history; why they gave his name to the king and made him the symbol of providence; why Christ took him as the type of self sacrifice."

The Shepherd was personally responsible for the sheep.

If a sheep died, the shepherd must at least bring home the fleece to show how it had died.

The shepherds were experts at tracking and would follow the footprints of a straying sheep for kilometres.

It was all in a day's work for the shepherd to risk his life for the sheep.

Many flocks were communal flocks and belonged **NOT** to individual farmers but to villages. There might be two or three shepherds in charge.

Those whose flocks were safe would arrive home with the news that the other shepherd was still out searching for a sheep which was lost.

The whole village would be on the watch and then when the shepherd returned, there would be rejoicing over the return of the valuable animal.

This is the picture Jesus draws of God --- God does not write off the lost --- but goes in search because of the value of the individual "sinner" and rejoices in his or her restoration.

Where as, the orthodox Jew of Jesus' day could write off the tax collector and sinner. This was not the way of God.

William Barclay writes: "It is a thousand times easier to come back to God than to come home to the bleak criticism of men" (men and women)

(a hymn expresses this...) Hymn: AHB 72 "Souls of men why do you scatter like a crowd of frightened sheep? foolish hearts, why do you wander from a love so true and deep?"

There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea,
and forgiveness in his justice
sealed for us on Calvary.

There is plentiful redemption
in the blood that has been shed:
there is joy for all the members
in the sorrows of the Head.

For the love of God is broader
than the measures of man's mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.

But we make his love too narrow
by false limits of our own,
and we magnify his strictness
with a zeal he will not own.

If our love were but more simple
we should take him at his word;
and our lives would be illumined
by the goodness of our Lord."

Frederick William Faber 1814-63

The story of the coin also highlights the nature of God to seek and to save.
small coin --- few dollars
darkened house
dirt floor

May have been sheer necessity for someone so poor
But it may also have had special meaning and may have come from the headress of ten silver coins
which was the equivalent of the wedding ring.

Possibly the stories indicate the special nature of that which is lost
--- sheep
---coin
(---Son)

and indicate an intrinsic value in ordinary people. --- tax collectors and sinners as well as the outgoing nature of God.

These stories are a commentary on what Jesus was doing --- seeking and saving the **lost**, those on the wrong path!

Jesus still does this as we read his word, receive the sacrament, as we become sacraments and go on to become mediators, here we experience his mediation....

As Paul writes in 1Timothy, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."