

Our very strange God

St Philip's Anglican Church. O'Connor

Revd Rebecca Newland

Pentecost 17C, 15 September 2013

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 and Psalm 14 or Exodus 32:7-14 and Psalm 51;

1 Timothy 1; Luke 15:1-10

Dear Friends, did you know your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was a glutton, a drunkard and a friend of tax collectors and sinners? That was what his followers accused him of back in Luke 7.34 — and not without some justification. There was that bizarre story of him changing six large jars of water into 680 litres of premium wine. There were all those occasions when he couldn't say no to food, when it was theoretically unavailable due to Sabbath restrictions, and he certainly welcomed tax collectors and sinners at his table. We may think these accusations are not so bad. Tax collectors after all provide an essential public service, sinners are simply misunderstood and unloved and who hasn't overindulged on pavlova or got a bit tipsy on red wine?

But these were serious accusations. Jesus was a known leader of a group of passionate followers. He had influence and obvious power. When people looked at him they expected to see someone of upright character, a person of principles, someone who could lead with integrity and model good behaviour. As parents, don't we look at our political leaders, celebrities and sports stars and hope and pray they will set a good example for our young folk?

In Jesus' day a sinner was not a person whose lifestyle others had a personal opinion about. A sinner was a very particular type of person. They were people who had broken a specific religious law, part of the law of Moses, were found out and had subsequently been excluded from community worship. Back then the temple was the centre of community life. Religion was integral to public and relational life and if you broke a religious law you became an outcast. You could not eat with others, talk to them, be in fellowship with them. This may seem like out-and-out cruelty, and it was cruel, but it served important functions. It was a mechanism to keep communities unified and safe—it controlled bad behaviour and it very neatly created a whole class of people everyone else could blame and revile, thereby maintaining a sense of peace and unity.

We may think we are over-taxed, but under Roman occupation the Jewish people were taxed to the hilt and to the brink of poverty. Tax collectors were often wealthy foreigners, non-Jews, who added extra costs on the business. They skimmed off the top in a ruthless and corrupt manner. It would be like the Australian Tax Office being staffed by foreigners who, through underhand means, skimmed beyond what we could pay from all of us and then sent it offshore.

So here is Jesus, this new spiritual leader, eating and drinking with the very people the rest of the community had decided were to be reviled and excluded for very good reasons. Jesus wasn't just turning up at synagogue and being a good Jew, saying nice and biblically accurate things about God. By his table-fellowship habits, he was challenging and tearing down the very fabric of their social constructs. Challenging their collective authority and judgement. No wonder they couldn't stand him and were always looking out for ways to disempower him, to bring him to a controllable level.

In today's gospel reading, his critics are just grumbling about him. We know of course that that grumbling finally led to betrayal, violence and murder, but for today they are just

complaining. And so Jesus tells them three parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. Today we heard the first two.

It was said of Jesus that he only taught in parables. It is a masterful way to teach, for parables demand the active participation of the listener. Hearing a parable is not like hearing a list of facts or dates or doctrines. Parables are more like poetry. They are metaphors drawn from nature or common life and there is something arresting about them, something vivid or strange that leaves the mind unsettled. Parables tease the person into active thought, into wondering and questioning. They do not provide answers. They provide questions to ponder and they demand interpreting by the hearer. That's why you can go back to them again and again and find out more and more. There is something beautifully free about a parable. For me that means that there is something beautifully free about Jesus and how he reaches out to us.

So what is strange and vivid in these two parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin? Since they were told in response to the Pharisees grumbling about Jesus welcoming and eating with tax collectors and sinners, how can we interpret them faithfully? One strange thing was that Jesus told two stories, one about a man and then about a woman. Luke has Jesus as very gender inclusive, very strange for first century Palestine. The two parables are also balanced in that one is set in the fields, the economic realm, and the other is set in the house, the domestic realm.

But what is completely strange, completely nutty and bizarre is the behaviour of the shepherd and the housewife. They both are obviously well off and wealthy. The man has 100 sheep. The woman has 10 silver coins. The man leaves 99 of those 100 *in the wilderness* and goes off searching for one that is lost. The woman drops everything, cleans the house from top to bottom and carefully searches until the coin is found. When the sheep and the coin are found they are so overwhelmed with joy they put on a party to celebrate. Their behaviour is quite simply over the top. In the case of the shepherd it would not be a stretch to say it is insane. Luckily we are not left scratching our heads too much about the meaning of these stories for Jesus gives us a clue as to how to interpret them. He says, 'I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety- nine righteous persons who need no repentance.'

The insane shepherd is God. The obsessive-compulsive housewife is God. In these parables, the God of Jesus Christ is very strange. This God actively searches for that which to others seems insignificant. This God is a God who seeks and comes looking for us no matter where we have wandered off to. This is a God who actively looks for those people everyone else writes off, or blames, or punishes, or scapegoats. This is a God who never ever gives up on any of his children or creation. It reminds me of that saying, "You may not believe in God but God believes in you." This God is not like a grumpy parent who resentfully sorts out his children's problems—again. Or has to rescue them—again. This God is so overjoyed when we are found that he celebrates with great joy. The angels, the saints, the Father, the son and the Holy Spirit, the whole creation gets down and has a party.

I don't know what your particular sins may be, what causes you to go off target, away from centre. That's what sin is you know: it comes from the Greek word, *harmatia*, related to archery—to miss the mark. I know my sins shift and change, sometimes according to the weather or my mood. What gets my aim out can be anything from fear and tiredness to ignorance and distraction. But whatever our sins may be, whatever we have done while off centre and heading down our own road and not God's, isn't it extraordinary to think that God is actively searching for us, always loving us? When we get our act together and find God there with us, find ourselves in his arms, isn't it amazing to think heaven rejoices?

Now this picture of lost sheep and coins, God searching, finding and celebrating, may seem very quaint to our sophisticated, well-educated, 21st century ears. Do we really think God is like a shepherd, a housewife, an extravagant father? Do we really think that God is that interested in each one of us? Does God really actively search for you and me when we stray and become lost? After all, we have come a long way from first century Palestine. We have put a man on the moon, invented the atomic bomb, developed the theory of evolution and seen the beginning of the universe through our powerful telescopes. In the face of our progress, where does God fit anyway? Who is God really?

It actually does not matter what metaphor we are use or what we are comfortable with. For me the message of these parables is that God cares deeply for each part of God's creation. The message is that God is active love—that the word 'God' is a verb, a doing word, a word that reaches out across space and time to gather, each one of us, all creation, into a reconciled, united whole. Those simple parables of Jesus are a most powerful way to get us to see this truth and to respond to it with our own decision of love and gratitude. The parables tell us we have a very strange God who does not act according to our preconceived ideas of what makes rational sense. They tell us that we have a very strange God who loves saints and sinners alike and actively searches for those who are lost, outcast, shamed and ashamed, guilty and oppressed.

We have a very strange God and thank God we do. This is the sentiment of Paul in the First letter to Timothy. Paul writes that he is thankful to Christ Jesus for the trust, mercy and forgiveness he is shown even though, as he points out, he was a blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence. Paul relates how he sinned in ignorance and how grateful he is that he still has a life and purpose in God. As he writes, "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost."

This is the overarching theme of the Gospels and of the whole New Testament, that God in Jesus Christ became one of us so that we may be found, saved, healed and made one again with God. The message is that God in Jesus Christ reveals the true nature of God a loving being who actively seeks us and rejoices in our presence. A loving being that loves all—saint and sinner alike. This is truly good news and it should set us free to love and serve each other, to party and celebrate and be united in peace and justice. If we could just let this good news sink in, that we and all creation are valued and loved just as we are by the Lord of all, imagine how our lives would change!

As we gather at the altar, may we know that heaven is rejoicing that we are here, sharing, loving and celebrating. It does not get any better than that. Amen.