

I Timothy 1:12-17

12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. 13 Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. 14 The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. 16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Luke 15:1-10

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.'

3 Then Jesus told them this parable: 4 'Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep." 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.

8 'Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin." 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

The lost sheep Luke 15:1-10

acknowledges to Kenneth E. Bailey - *Poet and Peasant*, commentary on Luke.

The clue to this parable is in the question, or rather the complaint, from the Pharisees and teachers of the law. The general message of the parable, and the second parable, the lost coin, is that every person is uniquely valuable to God and that He will go to any extreme necessary to gain our trust and win us over. It's easy to pay lip service to this when we live rich and comfortable lives with everything we need to hand. But look at the complaint against Jesus' outrageous behaviour:

'This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.'

Jesus loved to spend time with the people who were regarded with contempt because they were 'sinners'. They were known to be people who led immoral lives in some way, or who were corrupt like the tax collectors. They were not accepted in polite society and were an embarrassment to be seen with, but Jesus chose to hang out with them.

Kenneth Bailey in his commentary points out that *shepherds* were numbered among the unclean, so when Jesus says *Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them*, He puts the Pharisees and *all of us* in the role of a shepherd for the sake of the parable. It's intended to shock. It's strange because allegorically God in the Psalms is a shepherd, and Moses was regarded as a shepherd, and Jesus described himself as a shepherd.

But shepherding itself was a proscribed trade, along with tax collecting and prostitution. And yet Jesus' birth was announced first publicly to who? Shepherds!

Anyway in response to the Pharisees' accusation Jesus tells these two parables. So we have to bear all that in mind when we're trying to understand them.

So - 100 sheep. That would have been too many for one person to own, and so the shepherd would be responsible to other people. It would be understood that they were communally owned. Here is Kenneth Bailey's explanation of the probable scenario:

In the middle east a flock is never attended by a single person. When one sheep is lost and the shepherd goes looking for it, another shepherd takes the flock home. On arrival the neighbours would at once notice the shepherd's absence, and his safety will also be an issue. So the finding and bringing home of the sheep is a matter of great thanksgiving in the community.

So there are 4 themes here:

1. **The joy of the shepherd.** A lost sheep lies down and won't move, so it would have to be carried home. And yet he *joyfully puts it on his shoulders*. And when he *calls his friends and neighbours together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep"* the communal celebration is as important as the searching and finding.

2. **The burden of restoration.**

Having found the sheep the job is not done. It has to be brought back home on his shoulders and returned into the community. There is a clear parallel with the crucifixion, Jesus taking our sin upon himself. There is no restoration without the bearing of the burden.

3. **The gracious love of God.** God's primary aim is to save the sinner, and this is a characteristic of both parables here, that God goes out to find us before we even realise our need to repent. God seeking us, not us looking for Him. Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, and more importantly to us today, that it is those who have no faith who should be our focus.

4. **Repentance.** Isaiah (53:6) prophesied about the coming Messiah: *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* Some rabbis taught that there were some who were completely righteous and did not need to repent. Jesus's ironic reference to the 99 who do not need to repent is quite mischievously aimed at the self righteous Pharisees. We're all in the same boat. As St Paul said, *ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23), and that is the truth of the matter. The 99 sheep in the parable are left in the wilderness (v. 4) - we actually don't know how or if they got home!

In Judaism in the first century the kingdom came in through people repenting. For Jesus the kingdom had already come, and repentance was the response.

God's focus is on those who have not *been* found. Who have not *found Him!* The passion of God is for all to be saved, his eye is always on the lost. The found are at peace with Him, as they were created to be. We're all created to be at peace with God and we don't ever really feel at ease with ourselves until that happens. I have to say that Her Majesty the Queen was someone who was at ease with herself and her role in life, and it was undoubtedly because she was forgiven and at peace with her creator. I heard someone on the radio yesterday say how do you think she became such a loved and wise person? It was entirely down to her faith. The fact that she was such a constant and reassuring presence could only have been because of this. I pray that in the next week people without faith might be able to see this and themselves be found by God.

I hope that, like me, you will be comforted by the example of Jesus of Nazareth who, often in circumstances of great adversity, managed to live an outgoing, unselfish and sacrificial life ... He makes it clear that genuine human happiness and satisfaction lie more in giving than receiving; more in serving than in being served. QE II 2008

Amen