

## Parable – The Lost Sheep

8.7.06 St Mary's, Banbury

A reading from St. Luke's Gospel chapter 15

All the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So Jesus told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, 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. This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Those of you who have been following the series of parable sermons closely and know our windows well may be thinking – it is the wrong window on display today. Well you are right but there is a reason for this. We have gone slightly out of sequence as it is our monthly family service at the 9.30am service and this month with pets too - so it seemed appropriate to look at the window depicting the Parable of the Lost Sheep.

So you've heard the parable as our gospel reading, so now let's look at the window in detail. And the scene is dominated by the young shepherd carrying on his shoulder a sheep, or looking at the size of it, more like a lamb - it is more likely to be an inquisitive young lamb rather than a sheep that has gone and got itself well and truly lost. And if you have ever looked at a sheep and thought of carrying it, well you wouldn't ponder for too long – they are substantial creatures. Last summer we spotted a sheep that had got stuck on the far side of the canal where, the bank had collapsed into the water. Should we rescue it? We soon realised the question was more "Could we rescue it?" and the answer was clearly, "No". This was a job for an expert – we found the farmer and he sorted it out!

So let's look at our shepherd – and note his staff, useful not only for helping in walk, especially over uneven or rocky ground, but, with its hooked end, can be used to help yank a sheep out of the tricky situation.

The shepherd is wearing a simple blue smock but around his shoulders is a rather glamorous cloak – note the detailed pattern on the yellow cloth and the dark purple lining. His sandals are somewhat rudimentary – only the tie around the calf and a thong between two toes can be identified.

Across the shepherd's body is his shepherd's purse. It doesn't look too bulky – well it is long past lunch time, maybe all that is in it now is a catapult and a few pebbles for warding off wild animals.

It has been a long day for the shepherd. Out on the hilltops with the sheep all day and now he has had to go and search for the lost one. Thankfully, his extra journey has been successful and what may have been lines of fatigue on his face as he set out on his mission are no longer there and he returns in a spirit of rejoicing. See the light on his face, contrasting with the darkness of the red sky- it is clearly well into the evening now. And so the shepherd returns down the path from the hill slopes and you can spot the path rising up through the trees in the distance. A rocky stony path which leads on towards the village, may be even a town, ahead.

And the text around the window matches the expression on the shepherd's face – "He rejoiceth more of that sheep than of the ninety nine which went not astray."

And I'm sure that all of us at some time have experienced the great joy of finding something, even someone who has gone missing. We had a hamster named Hannibal who escaped from his ball one

evening, when I had left my father in charge. He was distraught when we returned and even with 3 people searching no golden, furry creature was to be found. We set up food in various points of the house, closed doors and decided all we could do was wait and watch. But as we were having our supper drinks, there was a scrabbling from a cupboard, high above our heads. We got the steps out and there on the top shelf was a very, very grubby hamster. He had managed to climb the stairs, get into the bathroom, and climb down a pipe under the bath. We didn't quite call the neighbours in to celebrate but there was certainly great rejoicing and the neighbours heard all about it in the morning.

If that is how we felt over our hamster, then similarly the shepherd over the lost sheep and God over each and every one of his children.

This morning we've heard St Luke's version of this parable. And St Luke places it first in a series of "lost and found" parables. The parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost sons (more commonly called the parable of the Prodigal son).

They were told in the context of ..... "All the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

They are parables we need to hear and hear again- to remind us of the welcome that is there for us when we are lost and need to be found – and as warning against judging others or when those feelings of jealousy or complacency started to weave their bonds around our hearts.

And around the window there is a background of a plant weaving its way around the window. Then if we move outwards we see a border which is full of plump and ripe fruits – you almost want to pick them and start to munch! Yes, this is a window which celebrates creation in all its fullness. I can't quite work out what these objects are in the centre of the 4 borders – perhaps a bird's eye view of a crown. And I puzzled for quite a while over the faces in the corner – youngish faces, with wings behind.

But then I turned to St. Matthew's version of the parable. Matthew chapter 18. And Matthew sets it in rather a different context from Luke. Jesus is with his disciples and they've been asking him, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven". Jesus calls a child to him and tells his disciples... "unless you become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." We all need to put aside cynicism and contempt and foster the qualities of child-like and indeed pet-like trust. I sometimes think the older we get the more we have to learn from children – and indeed from our pets too.

And Jesus' words then get stern - there are warnings about not causing children to sin. "Woe to you! It would be better to have a great millstone fastened around your neck and be drowned in the depth of the sea."

And Jesus continues, "See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven." - and these faces with wings behind, here on our window may indeed be representations of the angels!

"See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven." and Jesus continues..... "What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one goes astray....." and, according to St Matthew, Jesus launches into the parable of the lost sheep. And what do you think? We all have to make our own response to a parable. What is it saying to us? Who or where are we in the parable? And it may be a different place on different days!

Jesus told that parable a little over 2,000 years ago. But just for a moment I want to think about a sheep that had she lived a longer would have celebrated her 10<sup>th</sup> birthday this last week. Dolly, the sheep. Dolly was the world's first cloned animal. Cloned by the Roslin Institute in Edinburgh. She died some time ago and rather young for a sheep – aged only 5 ½.

When she was born the headlines were “Stupendous, mindboggling.” and there were hopes and fears that we would soon have herds of identical, prize-winning cattle, sheep producing medicines from their milk and therapeutic cloning would soon be able to produce genetically matched tissue to mend almost every human injury. Well, 10 years on it ain't quite like that – “Thank goodness,” some may say, “What a pity,” is the cry of others. Progress has been slower than expected but just last month the first drug to be made from a genetically engineered animal, a goat, was licensed by the European Medicines agency. It is an anti-clotting protein “anti thrombin” – and it is claimed that one goat in a year can produce in its milk as much anti-thrombin as 90,000 donations of human blood. You can see the attraction!

And I'm not saying we shouldn't be doing this. But I am urging caution and I am glad that there are committees and agencies which wrestle with the ethical dilemmas raised by scientific progress. There aren't easy answers and I guess there are many different views within our congregation today. God has given us a wonderful creation, and he really does care for it, even, especially for the lost sheep. We do well if we treat each and every part of it with respect and care.

And so to end, I want to return to the very end of our epistle reading 2 Corinthians 6 v 1-13 (and to verses 11-13) . St Paul is speaking. .... “We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections; but only in yours. In return – I speak as to children –open wide your hearts too.”

The wider we open our hearts, to one another on good days, to one another when we are as lost as the sheep of the parable was and to all of creation, then we come closer to God, who searches out the lost and brings them home.