

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 12 SEPTEMBER 2010

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Luke 15: 1-10

"Lost Sheep, Lost Coin"

Most of us will be very familiar with the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Probably so familiar that we don't even notice that these are in fact extremely odd stories with an intricate network of meaning woven into them.

Explained at the Sunday school I went to as a child it went somewhat like this: The lost sheep are the people who don't come to Church on Sunday. The people who aren't Christians like us. They are a bit of a nuisance, because Jesus has to go look for them. Fortunately he really likes to find them and bring them back to the fold. So in the end everyone is happy: Jesus because he's found someone who'd gone astray and the lost sheep because they have been found.

Usually this story was accompanied by stories of converted criminals and mean spirited adults changing their lives on Christmas night. And promises of Jesus' great love finding us and bringing us back lovingly whenever we would go and stray.

And the coin? Well the same thing really, a thing with a will of its own it that should have stayed with the others.....

I don't know with what understanding of these stories you've grown up, or what your understanding of them is now. Looking at them again, I found some new and very interesting angles, which were both refreshing but also unsettling.

Because who, or what exactly was lost and found in these stories? Are they about what is lost? Or are they more primarily about what has let itself be found? Or aren't they about being lost or found at all?

Let me explain.

The story starts with sinners and tax collectors visiting Jesus and some good old Pharisees standing nearby frowning at the ease with which Jesus seems to be mixing with these people.

It is to the Pharisees Jesus tells his story, starting with the sentence: "Who would not....."

Indeed, who would not, if they were a shepherd and lost one sheep leave 99 others to their own devices in the wilderness and go looking for this one stray sheep? Well, the answer is very plain and simple: Nobody! In their right mind that is. Although a sheep represented considerable capital and could be somebody's livelihood, surely a good shepherd would not leave his sheep in the wilderness but take them to the fold first before setting off to find the one lost sheep.

Who would not, if they were a homemaker and lost one coin out of 10 go and turn the house upside down to look for it? Everybody would! But I am quite sure nobody would throw a big party after they'd recovered the coin, since that would probably cost them a lot more than the money they found!

We've got an irresponsible shepherd here and a not so very capable budget manager.

I don't know about you, but I also rather feel for the poor sheep left in the wilderness to fend for themselves. They seem to get a very poor deal for staying close to the shepherd at all times. Neither can I help feeling some disapproval for the spend thrift woman. Wouldn't she have been better off just quietly putting that unruly coin back into her piggy bank?

So who is Jesus referring to in this story?

The Pharisees who Jesus is talking to will probably have assumed he is referring to the sinners and tax collectors visiting Jesus as people who are as lost as the stray sheep and the lost coin. They may be lost, but, if we read the story carefully, you'll discover they aren't found. They do the finding. They take the initiative to come and find Jesus to hear about God's inclusive love. It doesn't say the visit changes their life either. So their being found remains a question. All it says is that they come to visit Jesus and want to hear Jesus' message.

So if we stay with the text, drawing a parallel between the sheep, the coin and sinners and tax collectors, is one that does not work. Jesus doesn't leave everyone to go look for them, and he doesn't find them either. They find him.

The rejoicing after the sheep and the coin are found, especially in the case of the coin, is quite over the top. If we assume that the shepherd and the woman both refer to God or Jesus (interesting image of God as a home maker by the way), this not only means that they drop everything to go look for something or somebody that needs to be found, it also says that upon finding them there is extravagant joy on earth as well as in heaven.

'Who would not?' is Jesus' challenging question at the beginning of the story. In what follows, like he often does in parables, Jesus turns assumptions about who is lost and needs to be found on its head. Who would not leave 99 sheep in the wilderness? Who would not spend 9 coins to throw a party to celebrate the one coin that was recovered? The answer is, plain and simple: nobody would!

So what is Jesus telling his audience through these stories?

That to God every one sheep gone astray is precious? That to God every one coin gone missing is worth finding and rejoicing about? Sure. But there is more. With this story Jesus confronts those who are less generous and less committed to each and every part of God's flock with how stingy and calculating their own behaviour is. He holds up a mirror, making those who consider themselves "good" realise they may be the ones that are actually lost in the wilderness without realising it. Is Jesus referring to converted sinners that heaven rejoices over right at the end of the story? Or is it the Pharisees that fail to identify with the shepherd and the woman in the story and throw a good party instead of reproaching Jesus for his generous behaviour towards people who they consider to be outsiders who need to be found? And are promised a good party if they do?

The next question then, of course, is, where in this very complicated and multi-layered story, are we? And could it perhaps be that we are in all places all at once?

Are we that one lost sheep? Finding ourselves straying from the flock, and then longing for some loving arms to lift us and bring us to somewhere warm and comfy? Feeling there are questions living in our hearts that set us apart from the 99 other sheep, things that separate us from the 9 other coins in God's purse? Do we feel, sometimes, that we are not much good and not really a worthy

part of the people who seem to be able to follow in Jesus' footsteps without ever deviating left or right?

Or do we feel more at home with the 99 that have been left in the wilderness? It can feel that way sometimes can't it? And I bet it's the way the Pharisees felt listening to Jesus story. Have you been trying hard, doing your very best and there you find yourself bewildered in the wilderness, looking for leadership, guidance, safety and comfort and all you get is a lot of other bleating sheep around you. Doesn't the Church feel like that at times? Bleating sheep, being very good at being good, staying together and working hard at following their Lord and shepherd and somehow not getting it entirely right. Ending up even more lost than the lost sheep ever was? (He or she went off on their own accord after all, lost themselves, but the 99 are left!).

Do we identify with the shepherd? Joining in God's effort to find what is lost, caring for whoever seems miserable and lonely and out of place. Seeking out outcasts, and accepting them with love? Or with the woman, putting every effort into finding that one lost coin and then throwing a party. Is our joy quite as much over the top every time some minor progress is made in the quest for wholeness and healing of God's world?

At the end of the story it is really quite clear who are lost. And it is not the sinners and tax collectors. It is those who would rather lose one sheep than risk the 99 others, and who would never throw a party over just one coin lost and found.

Jesus', God's love is lost on them, they don't understand his passion nor his extravagant love. Which is, instead, found by those who are, at the outset, considered to be outsiders. Their finding what is most precious in its turn then causing a riotously extravagant party in heaven. Amen.