

Sermon preached at Downing Place United Reformed Church

15th September 2019

In our gospel reading Luke recounts how as the tax-collectors and sinners crowd in to listen to Jesus, He is challenged by the Pharisees and scribes.

He tells a parable. If one of us had a hundred sheep and lost one of them, would we not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that is missing until we find it?

There's always a danger of trying to read too much into the parables – a danger I shall probably fall into this morning. Particularly because I have a difficulty with this one! Would we really risk leaving 99 sheep in the wilderness in order to search for one that was missing? I'm not sure that I would. If they were safely in the sheep pen, perhaps, but in the wilderness?

The second parable of the woman who loses one of her ten silver coins seems more logical. If I was in her position I would certainly light the lamp, sweep out the house and look in every corner in the hope that I would find it.

Risking the possibility of stretching these parables far too far, it occurred to me that there might be a contemporary version. Which union of 28 nations, in the process of losing the affiliation of one, wouldn't do everything in their power to reverse the loss? It doesn't quite work, because of course the nation that was lost would need to want to return to the fold and the remaining 27 would want to be certain that they wanted to keep it! In this case, the one that is lost doesn't seem to know what it wants and the patience of the remaining 27 is being sorely tested.

Which perhaps leads us rather neatly into our Old Testament lesson from Exodus.

Here we have a story of a people who have lost respect for the rules and for everything that they have achieved as God brought them out of Egypt with great

power and a strong hand. There is a very real danger that they will throw everything away. It resonates, doesn't it? We seem as a nation to be losing so much of what we have achieved in partnership with other nations and losing respect for the rules and the behaviours that enable us to function as a cohesive and civilised society.

At the beginning of the reading from Exodus, Moses is at the top of Mount Sinai, having received the Ten Commandments and instructions for the pattern of the tabernacle. He has left the people below, and they have not coped well in his absence. Feeling bereft of their shepherd, the people lose no time in turning aside from the way which they had been commanded to follow and persuade Aaron, Moses' brother, to create a golden calf. They prostrate themselves before it and make sacrifices to it. God of course is not pleased! He describes the people as stiff-necked, a metaphor for obstinacy, probably derived from farmers' experiences of work animals who would develop stiff necks after periods of work. We might think instead of a toddler refusing to be strapped into a car seat! Obstinate, difficult, awkward – frustrating our purpose when in a rush to get on and do something.

We are presented here with a picture of God succumbing to anger and God, in his anger, offering Moses the opportunity to go it alone:

“Now, let me alone to pour out my anger on them, so that I may put an end to them and make a great nation spring from you.”

Moses ignores the opportunity to go it alone, and fights on behalf of the people God has made him responsible for. Here at least, in Moses, is a leader who remains true to his promises! He is determined to remind God of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Israel. God starts by trying to shake Moses off – ‘now let me alone’, he

says – but then changes his mind. God reverts to his ultimate characteristics of mercy, steadfast love and faithfulness.

Our New Testament lesson from Luke begins with ‘all the tax collectors and sinners’ crowding in to see Jesus. The Pharisees and scribes are murmuring their disapproval of the company that Jesus was keeping. These were probably the ancient equivalent of hedge fund managers, property speculators, insider traders, revellers, and, especially, colonial collaborationists. No wonder the scribes and Pharisees were murmuring their disapproval. Jesus tells a series of three parables, although the third (which we know as the parable about ‘the prodigal son’) is not included in the lectionary reading this week. The first is about a shepherd searching for a lost sheep, and it gives us an opportunity to observe different takes on the same parable. In Matthew’s gospel, it is about the Church’s responsibility to care for those of its members who go astray. For Luke, it is about sinners who repent. With two different gospel takes on this story, we gain some freedom to develop our own interpretations, always remaining aware of the danger that we try to read too much into it.

One obvious potential interpretation is that the shepherd in the parable represents God: There is plenty of precedent in the Old Testament for straying sheep to represent sinners and for God to be portrayed as a shepherd. But that is not the only possible interpretation: that the shepherd automatically stands for God. The shepherd could be each one of us, or the Church, reaching out to those in need and seeking to bring new people into the life of God’s kingdom – in a practical sense, bringing people in through our door.

We then have the second parable, about a woman who loses one of her ten silver coins and rejoices with her friends and neighbours when she finds it.

God seeking out the sinner that has been lost and celebrating when they are found and return. Should we read anything into the wealth of the woman? Ten silver coins was a lot of money. Whoever we believe the woman represents (God, us, the Church or possibly all three) it suggests that each are or should be concerned when something valuable is lost: might that be the loss of a church member; missing the chance to bring somebody in; or not taking an opportunity to meet a need in our community?

There is a possible further dimension to both of these parables: it would appear that both the shepherd and the woman were responsible for their losses in the first place. Has the shepherd been careless in watching over the sheep? Has the woman not stored her ten silver coins safely? Seen in this light, the parables then become lessons about taking responsibility, and setting out to rectify our mistakes when things go wrong. They are stories, perhaps, about leadership. Luke emphasises the joy on finding the sheep and the coin. Sometimes it takes the threat of losing something to realise how precious it is. Again we see a strong resonance with our situation today.

So both this morning's readings can be seen as being linked by the theme of taking responsibility. The shepherd and the woman take responsibility for what they have lost, and go out in search of it. Moses takes responsibility for the people who have strayed in his absence. Luke understands the parables to be about sinners who repent. In Exodus, the people sin, but it is God who doesn't exactly repent, but certainly relents. We may find this a very uncomfortable and primitive understanding

of God. We are generally more comfortable with a God whose mood is constant – compassionate, yes - angry, no. But the Exodus portrayal captures something of what many people actually experience: A God who doesn't always appear to show compassion to us in the situations that we face, at least not in the way that we hope for or understand. Moses intercedes for the people, reminding us perhaps of our responsibility in today's church community for intercessory prayer.

The sense of loss experienced by the shepherd and the woman is something we can empathise with. Just as their sense of loss was unnerving, so too can ours be.

I find it impossible to read today's lectionary readings without seeing powerful messages for both the perilous state of our nation and the worrying state of our church.

If you are familiar with how our lectionary works you will be aware that it has a three yearly cycle. Three years ago, on Sunday 11th September 2016, I was preaching at Abbey Lane URC in Saffron Walden. The previous July had seen the arrival of a new leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister, and a certain topic was very much in the news.

I'm beginning to believe that the state of purgatory might actually exist and that somehow we have all already arrived there. Three years ago, I said this in my sermon at Abbey Lane:

“For many of those who voted against Brexit in the referendum, there is an enormous feeling of loss, greater than the sense of loss anyone could feel over one sheep out of a hundred, or even one coin in ten. What has happened feels to many like the loss of a limb or a bereavement. It is felt by local people, by immigrants, and by friends and family across Europe.

Then again, those who voted for Brexit might feel they did so because of a sense of unease at a loss of British identity. A similar feeling affects people in many parts of Europe, and this has led to the rise of political parties with a nationalist agenda. We might even see this in Donald Trump's assertion that he wants to 'make America great again'. He appeals to people who feel a sense of loss, and wonder what being American might mean."

I went on to say that "It was as though the Moses figures had disappeared into the ether, leaving the people stranded in a wilderness from which there seemed to be no way forward. There was no one who could even explain how to proceed. That is a dangerous place to be."

In the story in Exodus, the people cried out for leadership, saying 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us. As everything unravels around us, people seem to be in denial, just as Aaron was. His excuse is wonderful 'I threw it (the gold) into the fire, and out came this calf!'. The fanciful claims of some of today's political leaders stretch credibility in a way that Aaron would probably recognise.

As with France after 'the terror' at the end of the 18th century, or Germany after the devastation of the Great War, the people of Israel in the wilderness were likely to follow anyone who might give them an identity, even if this meant deserting everything they had lived for and worshipping a golden calf.

I fear that there are those who would deliberately lead us into the wilderness, so that in our desperation we might follow anyone who might give us an identity.

These are dangerous times, and Jesus' day was no different. The kingdom of David was no more. How would Jews find an identity and a purpose? How should their sense of being the 'people of God' be expressed? Would there be a messiah?

Should they join the Zealots who wanted to overthrow Rome? Should they glory in Herod's Temple? Should they react against the cult of the Temple, and perhaps join some of new sects that had emerged? Should they endeavour to be scribes, or Pharisees? Should they be part of the establishment, or should they stand up for principle?

So what do we do in our dangerous times?

Despite the sorry and very worrying state of the world around us, I believe there is hope if we can only find a way to communicate the positive message at the core of our faith to those around us. It's quite a challenge, and we start from a very low base. Now, at the very real risk of stretching this morning's parables too far, maybe we should turn them on their head.

For our shepherd, in the church today, I think it isn't a case of losing one of his hundred sheep and going out to search for it. It is more a case of having only one sheep to start with and finding the other 99.

Similarly, the woman doesn't have ten silver coins. She's lucky if she has one and she desperately needs to find some more.

No matter how we present it, the church (in all its forms) seems somewhat uncomfortably to resemble a retired couple downsizing to more suitable accommodation.

That could, of course, be a very negative and depressing message. How much the loss of the 99 sheep and 9 silver coins is down to our own carelessness is a matter of debate, but I don't think we should beat ourselves up too much about it.

What I take heart from – what gives me hope – is that I believe our message is as relevant as ever and the United Reformed Church is in a particularly strong position to bring back into fellowship many who a few generations ago would be sitting here this morning but who no longer go to any church. If we have the determination of the shepherd looking for his sheep and the woman looking for her silver coin, then we have a vital part to play in bringing about God's Kingdom.

Both our Old Testament lesson and the parables tell us something about our relationship with God. We are the keepers of, the stewards of and the witnesses to God's Church. I would think that every single one of us, whatever our political views, despairs about the current state of our nation. If things get as bad as some of the forecasts suggest, then it will be the poor, the vulnerable, the infirm, those who already have very little, who will be hurt most. These are the very people that Jesus cares for, that we care for – and they are going to need that care so much more in the days ahead. I am sure we will all strive as Christians have done down the centuries to be positive movers in bringing about reconciliation and rediscovering the values that have been lost: the things that underpin the fundamental value of every human being to God.

Let us never lose sight of something that is very important, because there is something that we have not lost: We are here. We keep the flame alive. We bring light into the darkness. We may not comprehend how God's purpose is fulfilled, but I have a very strong sense, a very strong conviction that God will, in part at least through us and what we say and do, nurture the Kingdom and that through God's grace what has been lost will be found again. Through God's grace what has been lost will be found again.