

Sermon - 15th September, 2019

The Parable of Lost Sheep and Coin – Luke 15: 1-10

Jesus was preaching, and the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear him.

The Pharisees, who were strict law observers, criticised Jesus for welcoming sinners and eating with them (Luke 15. 1 – 2). In reply to the Pharisee’s criticism Jesus tells them two parables, namely the lost sheep and the lost coin.

Despite their distinctive beginnings, the two parables share a basic structure. (a) One item is lost from a much larger group, (b) the protagonist goes to great lengths to seek out the lost item, (c) when the item is found, they invite friends for a celebration. Jesus then offers the moral of the stories.

To interpret Luke 15, careful consideration must be given to the social and historical context in which this pericope (an extract from a scripture) was written. The reason to keep the social context in consideration is to avoid an ethnocentric and anachronistic reading.

Theologians believe the shepherd in this passage was related to Old Testament imagery, rather than the social and economic realities of the advanced agrarian society under the control of the Roman Empire, centered in the Temple in Jerusalem of first century Palestine. Most interpreters of the parable assume the shepherd owned the flock of sheep, or that the shepherd was hired as part of an extended family who owned the flock. Thus, the loss of one sheep is a loss to the entire clan, and so the whole family rejoices when the sheep is found. However, the common practice at that time was for owners to employ shepherds who were often strangers, a trade stigmatized by Jews as unclean, impure and dishonest.

Most shepherds came from a poor background and they were also forced into such an occupation due to heavy taxation by the elites. Shepherds were frequently compared to tax collectors, as they were nomads and they would bring their sheep onto other people’s land. Many became involved in criminal actions because of their mobility and they kept weapons to defend the flock and themselves.

Since the wages of shepherds were meagre, losing a sheep meant the income from the flock would be reduced and the shepherd would have to pay the cost for negligence. The loss also meant either the shepherd’s wages were reduced, or he had to replace the lost sheep, which was worth a month’s wages. The shepherd’s family was totally dependent on the wages received by the shepherd and therefore any loss of an animal would have a disastrous effect on the family’s chances of survival.

The second parable is about a lost coin.

The parable of the woman and the lost coin illustrates the extent of poverty experienced by women in first century Palestine. Those of us who have migrated from poor nations to first world countries are fully aware of the abject poverty back home. A first century wage earner would receive one coin for the day's work. So if the woman loses a coin then it was likely her husband's earnings and therefore recovering the lost coin would be vital for the family's survival and for peace in the home.

It was a necessity for survival, as well as a cultural expectation: a woman's role was to guard the money earned by men and to maintain order in the home. Her power and value in relation to men was as the central figure in the central institution of society – the home. Women controlled sex, honour, children and a happy well-organized household. Finding the lost coin was essential to maintain her image and self-worth, and indeed that of her family.

The parable gives sparse details about the woman. Theologians have concluded that the woman in this parable is poor. In that period, dwellings for the poor tended to have few windows, being enclosed on most sides by similar dwellings. Living in a single dwelling with darkness inside the house is therefore a sign that she was poor. She may have been single or responsible for the safekeeping of ten coins given to her by her husband. Lamp oil in the first century was also expensive to purchase and so needed to be used wisely. It was not easily sold in the open market, which can be inferred from the story of the 10-virgin bridesmaids. Having to light a lamp to search with would have intensified the woman's anxiety because of the expense. Even with the lamp, the darkness requires that she constantly sweep the dirt floor, hoping to hear the tinkle of the coin being moved. Also implied is that the poor woman must have informed her nearby friends and invited them to help her look for the coin as soon as she discovered that it was missing. After finding the coin she celebrates with her friends, as clearly the finding of the coin was important to her.

In both the parables we learn that once the sheep and the coin were found there was celebration and restoration of relationship. In our Australian Prayer book one of the prayers after the communion states "when we were still far off you met us in your son and brought us home." Some interpret far off as lost, and others as a lost relationship.

Time and again in the lives of Israelites wandered away from God called them by sending prophets to come back and restore relationship with their creator. God calls us today through various means to restore our relationship with God if we have wandered away. If we are lost God will find us one way or another.

Those who watched Jesus eating with Pharisees were upset and complained that Jesus was eating with sinners. Time and again Jesus extends His arm of Grace and friendship to all including sinners. Jesus creates a sacred space of hospitality in which people have the freedom to change themselves. Jesus does not force change but only extends His arms of friendship. The story is about a despised shepherd and a lost sheep intended to illuminate the truth about the Kingdom of God that becomes visible through the unexpected behaviour of a shepherd.

The shepherd could have solved the problem of the lost sheep by resorting to violence. Instead, he takes a risk to provide for his family through non-violence, recovering that which was lost instead of merely replacing it with another that was under another's care.

The Kingdom of God, therefore, is a place where there will be enough and all are accepted – shepherds, the poor and women, for anyone identified as despised, unclean and impure.

When the lost are found clearly there is a reason to celebrate and rejoice.

Amen.