

ADDRESS 11 September 2016

17th Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 4.11-12, 22-28 The judgment
 Psalm 14 Godlessness denounced
 1 Timothy 1 Instructions to Timothy
 Luke 15. 1-10 The lost sheep & the lost coin

Lord fill us with your grace, that we may find ever more truth in your living Word, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

There's an old saying that '*a man is known by the company he keeps*'. It is recorded in Greek literature six centuries before Christ; it's the moral of one of what we know as 'Aesop's Fables', so the saying would have been well-known to Jesus and his contemporaries.

The rabbis of Jesus' day had their own, even stricter, version, *Let not a man associate with the wicked, not even to bring him to the Law*'. So they were horrified by a religious teacher welcoming tax collectors and other sinners crowding around him to hear him speak. They probably included the unnamed town's prostitutes. Even worse, he was known to break bread with them.

Our text says that *the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen* – the verb form shows that this was happening often, it was not just a momentary lapse.

In response to the shock/horror of the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus told the crowd three parables, which we generally call the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the lost son. We come closer to the point if we call them the parables of the sheep that was found, and the coin that was found, and the son who found himself. Because Jesus' message is about God's grace in the three findings, rather than in the pain of the three losings.

Many truths can be looked at in two ways. Today's psalm, Psalm 14, is almost word for word the same as Psalm 53. But verse 5 is different – in today's psalm, verse 5 speaks of the company of the righteous; in psalm 53, verse 5 speaks of the ungodly, the ones whose bones God scatters. We can focus on the bad news of human sin and Divine punishment, or we can focus on the good news of repentance and forgiveness. Jesus spoke about both.

I wonder how many sermons you have heard from today's Gospel. Years ago, when I was a young Methodist preacher in Melbourne, I was often invited to speak at Sunday school anniversaries. We had no lectionary, so I could give the same sermon over and over, provided I was diligent in keeping a diary to make sure I did not repeat myself to the same congregation.

Many of you will remember that, in the 50s and 60s, Sunday School anniversaries were big events, with dozens, even hundreds, of scrubbed-up kids dressed in their Sunday best, sitting or standing on the platform, singing the hymns they had been practicing for weeks to their proud

parents and friends. And there was always a good spread afterwards – lots of chocolate cake and buns filled with raspberry jam and sickly butter cream, washed down with lemonade and cordial.

These three parables were the basis of my favourite message – they were down to earth, people could relate to the pain of losing a coin, or losing a son, although they were not so sure about the sheep. And the stories could be dramatised, to keep people's attention between the brackets of hymns. One memorable Sunday I gave the same message four times, at four different churches, starting at 9 o'clock in Middle Park and moving steadily east, to end at Lilydale at 7. I could not even look at a raspberry cream bun for months afterwards.

Suddenly I realised – in preaching about the lost, I had become lost myself, just like the sheep in the parable. Many of these parents and friends were not regular worshippers. But, instead of rejoicing in the opportunity I had been given to proclaim the message of salvation, I was simply enjoying being up-front for 15 minutes or so.

This was not what I had intended, just as the sheep in the parable did not intend to get lost; he was just a silly sheep who wandered away from the others. If the good shepherd had not gone looking for him, he could easily have died. So when the Sunday School anniversary season came around the next year, I simply kept to my regular preaching schedule.

My experience is just another example of the sad fact that there are silly sheep inside the church as well as outside – people who wander away from God without really intending to. They become so absorbed in what they do for the church that they lose their personal relationship with the lord of the church. They become lost to God in serving the church, just as others are taken away from God by their work or by their sport or by children's activities, or even by a garden that claims their attention. Others are lost to God when they stop loving other people in the congregation whom they do not like, and the ministry of the church suffers because of personal animosities.

Many of us have seen our children wander away from God as they grow older. They don't intend to get lost, but they fall in love and they set up a home and they start a family and they drift away from worship because of their new responsibilities and their new interests.

But God keeps calling them, and rejoices when they respond to his call, when they return to live in his love. In the meantime, we can only keep loving them and praying for them and setting them a good example by our own willingness to be led by the good shepherd, and we can rejoice with them when they return to his care.

The second parable is a warning that some people become lost because of the carelessness of others. This story is Jesus' direct rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees.

In an age without banks, Middle Eastern women would often sew their money into their headband, for security as well as for display. The head band was an important symbol – a bride would come to her husband with at least ten coins in her headband, often more. This was her dowry, and it belonged to her husband, just as she did, although Jewish Law would not allow a man's creditors to seize the dowry to help pay his debts. These coins were special.

For a woman to be so careless as to lose one of her dowry coins was to incur shame as well as blame. So this is a powerful story. In Jesus' story, the woman's coins were silver coins, not gold, so he is not speaking just to the rich.

The renowned Australian sociologist Hugh Mackay has just published his 17th book –with the title *beyond belief*. The book is based on interviews with several hundred men and women who have left the church. It's a disturbing book, because it presents many people as having left because people in the church were careless – they were unloving, or they turned away when people needed help, or they did not practice what they preached, or they were judgmental, or they were intolerant of people who questioned their particular approach to Scripture or tradition.

Here is a quote from the book, from a young man:

It was all supposed to be about this religion of love, but I found the hostility to non-believers, or even Christians with slightly different beliefs, quite breathtaking. It certainly wasn't loving. (p. 76)

And here is a young woman with a similar concern :

A lot of the Christians I know aren't really that loving when it comes to people with different opinions from theirs. Some of them obviously can't wait for the infidels to be punished. (p172)

Of course, being lost to the church is not always being lost to God -- some people go elsewhere, or they find other forms of spirituality -- many become *spiritual but not religious*, whatever that may mean. But it is harder to remain in God's care without the support of a worshipping community.

Mackay tells stories of people who stopped going to church and never heard from anyone in the church again, even from those they thought were their particular friends. It was out of sight, out of mind. And I thought of some of the people who have left this congregation in the last year or two, and felt ashamed that I had not been in contact with them, even those whom I knew well -- two of them were my fellow nominators.

In Jesus' story, the woman who lost the coin was diligent in searching for it, and we need to keep loving those who have left us, and remember them in our prayers, and keep in touch with them to assure them of our continuing friendship. It is not enough just to drop them out of the parish directory. If they don't want us to keep in touch, they will tell us.

Jesus' third parable is about a young man who made up his own mind to be lost – and there are plenty of them in Mackay's account as well. People who leave because of some churches' attitudes to women, or because they think they know better than to believe in miracles or in the literal truth of some Bible stories. Or people who want a church made in their own likeness, or a God who is small enough to fit inside their understanding. Here is another quote:

We've tried a fair few churches, but something always seems to be not quite right for my husband, he is a restless soul, I am afraid. They're too judgmental, or they are too liberal, or the music is too modern for his liking . . . I know what he means, though – it would be lovely to find a church where you felt welcome and accepted for who you are, without too many questions asked. (p56)

At its best, the church is a gathering place for those who were lost and now are found, whether they just drifted away, or were led away by someone's carelessness, or whether they were determined to do their own thing. The hymn we sang before the offering tells of the kind of church people would not want to leave

Within these walls let holy peace

And love and concord dwell.

Does this describe St Mark's? Or what about the next verse?

May we in faith receive your word,

And in the presence of our Lord

In faith present our prayers;

Unburden all our cares.

This hymn is all the more powerful because it was written by a man who was lost to God and then was found. John Newton was a British naval officer who became a slave trader. One night his ship was battered by a severe storm off the coast of Ireland. Newton awoke in the middle of the night. As the ship filled with water, he called out to God, and found God was there, in spite of the sins of his past life. Newton had discovered the amazing grace which he later wrote about in what has become perhaps the best-known hymn in the English language.

Paul, too, was lost and found by the grace of God, and our second reading today shows his concern to help others avoid what he calls the shipwreck of faith – a metaphor which comes from his personal experience.

Whether we acknowledge that we have been have been lost to God at some time in our lives, or whether we fool ourselves that we are among those righteous persons who need no repentance – we are all called to remain faithful to our great God. We need to continue to pray for those who have been lost, whatever the cause; and to rejoice with the angels when the lost are found and return to the welcoming arms of the Father. The Lord be with you.