

 *St Paul's Anglican Parish of Ipswich*
SUNDAY SERMON

Who does God rejoice over?

Delivered by Rev'd Michele Knight on the 15th September 2019

Who does God rejoice over? – Luke 15:1-10

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you, O Lord.

Today Jesus tells two parables about losing and finding. When first reading the passages for today I was reminded of an incident when I was conducting a funeral a week ago and a man came up to me and introduced himself as the back sheep of the family. I wondered at the time why he felt that way about himself. It prompted me to choose this is the graphic for the booklet I do up weekly to use when we take Communion to the homes of those who cannot come to church.

The first parable we hear in our readings today is about just such a sheep, who was lost, and about how the shepherd leaves the other ninety-nine behind, and then has a party when the one is found. The second is about a woman who loses a small coin, searches the whole house, and throws a party when it is found. I could very easily have spoken today at some length about my own experiences of having a 'lost sheep' and about the many debates I have had about the validity of never giving up on him, even to the detriment sometimes of my other very precious sheep. In the last verse Jesus says that there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents. I understand this on a very personal level.

So, what is the point of Jesus' story about a lost sheep and a lost coin? In Jesus' time shepherds normally counted their sheep at the end of the day to make sure all were accounted for. Since sheep by their very nature are very social, an isolated sheep can quickly become bewildered and even neurotic and become easy prey for wolves and lions. This certainly happens to lost people as well as sheep. So, the shepherd's grief and anxiety are turned to joy when he finds the lost sheep and restores it to the fold.

The housewife who lost a coin faced something of an economic disaster, since the value of the coin would be equivalent to her husband's daily wage. What would she say to her husband when he returned home from work? They were poor and would suffer greatly because of the loss. Her grief and anxiety turn to joy when she finds the coin that she had misplaced. Both the shepherd and the housewife "search until what they have lost is found." Their perseverance pays off.

The next section of Luke 15, verses 11-32 tells us the parable of the lost son – the prodigal son if you will, where the father never gives up hope and rejoices when his younger son, who has fallen from grace, returns home. All three narratives tell us how the folk involved instinctively share their joy with the whole community. We are right in understanding these parables in terms that God rejoices when something or someone is lost and then is found.

But we live in a world where most days it's hard to find something to rejoice about. In the past week we have watched again those terrible pictures of the terrorist attacks in the USA on the 11th September 2001 when 2,700 people (including 10 Australians) lost their lives in an instant. Do you ever wonder how God feels about these things? Where is the rejoicing here? We can easily fall into the trap of asking what there is to rejoice about in today's world and culture? Surely God must feel as we do; shock, sadness, anger, over people with free will created in his image, who commit atrocities, perpetuate cruelty, and perpetuate evil with no conscience or concern for the value of life. Surely these events and actions, sins if you will, must be a serious wound to the

heart of God who has created us to live in a loving relationship with him and our fellow human beings. How can He rejoice in today's world?

This is not a new story either. In fact The Bible is full of the stories of tragedy and betrayal of God by his people- the tragedy of Noah's world engulfed by a flood as a consequence of sin, a nation in slavery in Egypt because of the cruelty of the Pharaohs, a nation destroyed, and a remnant taken to Exile by the barbaric Babylonians. But alongside all this tragedy, God is always present, pointing and leading to the victory of love over evil - the rainbow and the olive branch after the flood, the Exodus from Egypt and the defeat of Pharaoh, the return from Exile and the rebuilding of the Temple. Even our Jeremiah and Psalm readings today talk of foolish people, stupid children and evil doers devoid of understanding.

But in Luke 15, we find a Gospel message, Good News, for today, captured in the two picture parables we hear along with the next story of the lost son. They too are full of tragedy but also triumph: the tragedy of one precious lost sheep, a woman's treasured coin, a young man rejecting and renouncing a father's love, but in each there is a wonderful outcome - the sheep is found, as is the woman's coin, and the son comes home, and in all of them there is cause for great celebrations.

In these parables, Jesus paints simple word pictures of his everyday life so his disciples may know what God is really like, and if we are made in the image of God, what we should be like as we live our lives in an often-tragic world.

The disciples had asked Jesus: "Show us the Father" and, in response, Jesus painted pictures of a God whom we've come to know:

- The extravagant farmer;
- The farmer with weeds that he let keep growing;
- The lady and her small coin
- The father and his good-for nothing son;
- The 'good' shepherd and his scrawny, old sheep.

And yes, God rejoices over every one! Jesus tells us that is what the Kingdom of God is all about.

However, in the Church of the time, as in today, there was a constant underlying dissatisfaction and judgment of how Jesus and others were behaving. The shocking thing for the people of the Church of Jesus time, was that Jesus actually liked these people that others despised and didn't judge them. That is why he talks about all that searching going on in the two parables. He never gave up on anyone, no matter what.

And so, what is our Church like? are we sometimes a little too complacent, even a bit judgemental of others? You know just when we settle down and thank God for all we have and our friends and that we don't have to mingle with those folk who we think don't have it together, Jesus says: "By the way, I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I'm going to find them too." And when I find them (Note, he doesn't say "if" but "when") Heaven goes wild."

Let's watch a short clip I found on the web some time ago which moved me tremendously. Its in Spanish but we don't need to understand the words, just watch the reactions and the faces of the pastor and the people. It really is a modern-day version of our first parable.

Video - [youtube.com/watch?v=m-U;db0p2jU&t=27s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-U;db0p2jU&t=27s)

Many of you today know me well, but don't and can't know why I make the decisions I make or respond the way I do to things. We should always be careful not to judge or criticize harshly without at least trying to look below the surface of people to understand what has brought them to that point.

So, what is God like, what does He rejoice over? What should we rejoice over as God's people?

In today's readings there are three words repeated over and over again which tell us what sort of love God has and what he rejoices over:

The first is "Lost": Jesus never called people "sinners". It was the Pharisees who often used that description for everyone who didn't fit in with their own particular brand of self-righteousness. Jesus called people "lost". Sometimes we are all like sheep, not lost from viciousness or deliberate choice, but from weak will and carelessness. Sometimes we are all like a small coin, lost not from our own fault, but because of other's carelessness and the circumstances of life. Sometimes we are all like the Prodigal son, lost through calculated self-will, selfishness and greedy independence.

There is nothing that is intrinsically wrong with someone who is lost. It is just that we are in the wrong place. We need direction. We just need to find our place and purpose in life and in God's Kingdom.

The second word used repeatedly today is "Seeking": Jesus tells us that our whole human experience, if we could only see it properly, is about God's seeking us. When conscience pricks, when we feel a sense of duty or obligation, when we're deeply troubled within, moody or upset, the Shepherd's Spirit is seeking, calling, urging, pointing, directing.

The third word used repeatedly today is "Until":

Love, God's love, will never be satisfied simply because there is a favourable percentage between those who are safe and those who are lost; that is 99% are safe, one is lost. Contrary to the direction in which our whole society has moved, we are not numbers or stripes on a bar code or computer. God seeks one life, every life; and he will seek until he finds every last one. And when he has found us, he doesn't get angry, or makes us limp home hurting and discouraged, he carries us on his shoulders!

People ask many questions about the future. Will God save the good people, gathering them into Heaven, and consign the bad in a mass to unquenchable fire? Who are good, anyway? These parables teach a different doctrine. Jesus says all the rejoicing spirits of Heaven are released for one lost spirit. God doesn't forget even one, he remembers everyone, even those who may be judged and despised.

What is God like? What does God rejoice over? From his own experience, and because his friendship with God was not abstract but real, Jesus who himself was the Good Shepherd, gives us the answer.

Yes. We can believe in God's power— much greater than any terrorist's. We can believe - in the face of so much evil in the holiness of God. Jesus revealed his love, the love that searches out us all, even when our freedom and our hatred have ruined us. All of us, good and bad, all the black sheep, are loved by a reckless, relentless God. This is a Gospel of hope and joy in a world of tragedy and sin and evil. It shall yet transform the Church and the world and God will rejoice.