

MATTHEW 18.12-14: THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP

Why did the lamb call the police? Because he had been fleeced!
What do you get if you cross a sheep & a kangaroo? A woolly jumper?
What did one sheep say to the other sheep? After ewe

Yes, there are a lot of sheep jokes on the internet.
But the reality is that in Jesus' time life was no joke for sheep
Pasture was often sparse – danger was often on hand
One of the dangers was that sheep in search for pasture were often liable to wander;
and if they strayed from the grass of the plateau into the gullies and the ravines at
each side, they had every chance of finishing up on some ledge from which they
couldn't get up or down, and of being marooned there until they died.

This morning I want us to look at Jesus parable of the lost sheep – what one PC pastor
called 'the parable of the geographically dislocated sheep'!
The parable tells of a shepherd with **100 sheep** (v12)
In Jewish law 300 head of sheep is reckoned as an unusually large flock. So, with
100 sheep, the man possesses a medium-sized flock;

How does he discover that one sheep is lost?
By **counting** them. A Palestinian shepherd counts his flock before putting them in the
fold at night, to make sure that none of the animals is lost. We can imagine him
counting: 95, 96, 97, 98, 99 -

What does he do? **He will leave the other ninety-nine** (v12)
But not on their own. If the shepherd had left them with no shepherd, he would have
come back to find more of them gone. Almost certainly he left them ***in the care of
his fellow-shepherds*** while he sought the wanderer.
For it was the custom for two or three shepherds to go out together..

The Gospel of Thomas speculates that the sheep that strayed was the "*largest*" which
the shepherd "*loves more than the 99*".
But it is far more likely that the lost sheep was ***one of the weaker ones***. Look at the
context in which Matthew sets this story. Immediately following the parable Jesus
comments: "**In just the same way your Father in heaven does not want one of
these little ones to be lost**" (v14).
The lost sheep didn't in itself have particular value - the shepherd went out to search
for the sheep not because it was worth a lot of money, but simply because it belonged
to him.

What does this parable have to teach us? That for every 99 sheep in the fold there is
one who is lost? Surely not! If anything the reverse is true today: for every 99
sheep, there is one in the fold!
No, ***this parable tells us something of God and his love*** - his love seen above all in
Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

1. GOD LOVES US INDIVIDUALLY

God does not love us en-masse - he loves us one by one.

He is passionately concerned not just for the well-being of the world in general, but for each individual in particular.

Go back to the story. One might have thought: What was one sheep out of 100?

Casualties are inevitable when out on such a barren terrain. Sheep are bound to get lost and die from time to time. Losing a sheep is one of the risks of the business.

One down, but still 99 left.

Yet for the shepherd the fact that 99 were safe was not enough - there was a sheep lost out on the hillside and the shepherd could not rest until he had brought it home.

Some people think that the larger a family, the less valuable each child is to the parents. Those of us who have more than the average number of children to a family know that is not true.

It may be true that when you are not so protective or over-anxious about them - frankly there is only so much nervous energy one can expend. But that doesn't mean to say that you no longer love them as much - you still love each one of them deeply. And when one of them is in trouble, you don't write that one off because the other three are OK

Strange as it may seem, God loves us with that same kind of deep individual love.

The love of God is not to be likened to an indiscriminate spray of shot-gun pellets.

He loves us one by one. So much so that I believe we can say that when Jesus died, he died as if it were only for you, or only for me.

God loves you - he loves you in particular - you are special - you count. Allow that thought to penetrate your heart and mind.

2. GOD LOVES US WARTS AND ALL

God doesn't love us because we are particularly loveable creatures - ***he loves us simply because we are his.*** This means that he loves us warts and all - he loves us in spite of all our failings.

Let's go back to the parable again. The shepherd cared for the sheep, not because it was a particularly special or loveable animal, but simply because the sheep belonged to him.

NB we need to rid ourselves of any romantic picture of woolly, cuddly lambs.

- ***sheep are not particularly pleasant animals.*** I'm told that they have no concern for their own cleanliness, and so tend to be afflicted by a variety of nasty pests. Hence the need to plunge them several times a year into powerful chemical solutions. We in turn are not particularly pleasant people. We have been infected by sin far more than we are aware of. We are not the kind of people God would want to naturally cuddle. And yet he loves us.
- What's more, ***sheep tend to be rather silly and stupid.*** Certainly the sheep in this story was rather foolish in wandering off on his own. We in turn can be rather

silly and stupid too. **"All of us were like sheep that were lost, each of us going his own way"** (Is 53.6). And yet in spite of our foolishness and wilfulness, in spite of the way in which we mess up our lives and the lives of others, God loves us. He loves you. He loves me.

3. GOD'S LOVE SEEKS US OUT

God is *pro-active*, not re-active, in his loving.

He does not return our love, rather he takes the initiative in seeking out our love.

In the story the shepherd was not content to wait for the sheep to come back; he went out to search for it.

Likewise God is not content to sit back and wait for us to return to him - he has gone out in search of us – he has sent his Son to bring us back.

It is at this point that Judaism differs markedly from Christianity. For the Jews agreed that God was prepared to forgive the sinner, if the sinner came crawling wretchedly home - but they did not know of a God who would go out in search of the lost, whatever the cost.

- Jesus said after his encounter with Zacchaeus: **"The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost"** (Luke 19.10)
- Jesus said to his disciples on another occasion: **"I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep"** (John 10.11).

God is not waiting for us to love him. He has taken the initiative. He has sent his Son into the world to save us from our lostness. What an amazing thought!

4. GOD IN HIS LOVE REJOICES

God is delighted when the lost are found, when the stray returns.

The rabbis used to say that God is happier over a righteous man than over a sinner who repents!

But in the parable the emphasis is totally different: **"When he finds it, I tell you, he feels far happier [rejoices over it more NRSV] than over the 99 that did not get lost"** (v13).

Nothing gives God greater pleasure than when the lost are found, when strays return.

There are *no recriminations* as far as God is concerned.

God isn't mad with us when he finds us. He doesn't give us a lecture about our stupidity in getting lost. God allows our past to remain in the past - for when he deals with our sin, he deals with it once and for all - he buries it in the deepest sea - with him it is all joy when the sinner repents.

It doesn't matter how much we have messed up our lives, there is a party in heaven when we open ourselves up to the love of God.

So far, so good. However, this is not simply a parable which illustrates the love of God. It is also *a parable to encourage us to show similar love to others*.

5. GOD LOVES YOU – AND SO DO WE

Often on flower cards - as indeed on other cards - I write a little message of encouragement: "**God loves you and so do we**". It may sound twee, but it is true. The thrust of this parable here in Matthew is: "**I love sinners - and so should you**".

It is interesting to contrast the setting of the parable of the lost sheep as we find it in Matthew with the setting as we find it in Luke.

- ***In Luke the parable is part of a collection of parables on the theme of lostness*** - for in Luke 15 the parable of the lost sheep is followed by the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the lost son.
And at the beginning of Luke 15 we read these words: "**One day when many tax collectors and other outcasts (NEB "bad characters") came to listen to Jesus, the Pharisees & the teachers of the Law started grumbling, 'This man welcomes outcasts and even eats with them!'. So, says Luke, Jesus told them this parable: 'Suppose one of you has 100 sheep and loses one of them – what do you do? You leave the other 99 in the pasture and go looking for the one that got lost until you find it'**" (Luke 15.1-3). Jesus here is defending his concern for the shady characters of his day. ***The emphasis is upon the lost sheep***
- Interestingly the way in which Matthew retells the parable the emphasis is different. In Matthew's version Jesus does not speak of a sheep that is lost - but rather of the sheep who "**has gone astray**" (NRSV – GNB "gets lost"). In one sense there is no difference - a lost sheep by definition is one who has strayed away from the others. And yet the setting in which we find the parable shows that almost certainly a distinction is intended by Matthew.

Look at the verse immediately before the parable. Matt 18.10: "**See to it that you don't despise one of these little ones. Their angels in heaven, I tell you, are always in the presence of my Father in heaven...**". Then in v14, immediately following on the parable: "**In just the same way your Father in heaven does not want any of these little ones to be lost**".

As the preceding verses make clear the "**little ones**" is not a reference to children, but rather to those who have exercised child like faith and have become followers of the Lord Jesus.

RT France: The "**little ones**" are "*ordinary Christians, who in their vulnerability need the care of their fellow disciples*".

In the verses preceding the parable (18.6-9) Matthew has Jesus talking about the danger of temptation - in the verses following on the parable Jesus grapples with how to deal with Christians who give in to temptation.

In such a context ***the sheep that has gone astray becomes equivalent to a Christian who has drifted away*** from church, and in so doing has strayed from Christian standards of behaviour.

The thrust of the parable is then to urge church leaders – and indeed Christians in general - to care not just for the lost, but for those who have strayed.

NB Mark Trotter: "*Matthew is interpreting the Parable of the Lost Sheep for his church. Here's the situation. somebody has been kicked out of the Church for what they have done. Or maybe they know they are going to be kicked out, so they are staying away. In other words, Matthew says (to the church leaders) "Go get him. Bring him back, forgive him and restore him to the fellowship.... This parable is about a leader who abandons those who behave themselves, who play by the rules, never stray from the straight and narrow, never get into trouble, and gives his attention to the one who breaks the rules, gets caught, and has to be bailed out"*

I find that a fascinating insight. Yes, we are to take sin seriously, yes we are to take church discipline seriously - but ***we are also called to love the sinner- to forgive the sinner***, 70 x 7 if need be!

Yes, we are called to be a righteous community - but not a censorious community. I read of a husband who had had an affair with another woman - but then come to his senses and realised how badly he had failed his wife. The couple went for counselling. The counsellor said to the woman: "*Now will you forgive him?*" "*No*", she said, "*he hasn't suffered enough yet*"

That's not the way God loves us in Jesus – nor is that the way we are called to love one another.

Like God, we are called to love individually - to love warts and all - to love by being pro-active - to love and to rejoice when the sinner repents – and to forgive completely.