

Sunday Between 4th and 10th September [23]

Matthew 18:10-20

Our gospel reading this morning is in two parts. There is both a parable and practical teaching, both of which are remarkably helpful in our lives even today, so long after those words were first uttered. That is the joy of scripture – even though it is an ancient book, it is written in such a way that the truth shines through. By truth, understand fundamental, unchanging realities of humanity and our relationship with each other and God rather than truth that is subjective and changes according to circumstance.

The parable is that wonderfully short but uplifting story of the shepherd who, on having 100 sheep finds one has gone missing and instead of playing the odds and being grateful that he still has 99 sheep, rather goes and seeks out the one lost sheep. It is a parable that speaks of the logic defying love God has for humanity much like the often logic defy love we have for one another. We recognise this love in God because it is mirrored in our own experience. There may well be some people for whom the loss of a single sheep out of a large herd would not be reason to risk leaving the rest unaccompanied, but if you change the parable to speak of a teacher leading a class of children on an excursion and one goes missing, you would expect no other outcome than the teacher did everything in their power to find the lost child. For Jesus' audience the sheep analogy worked, because sheep were valuable enough that they too could not be left to wander without consequence.

This parable is particularly comforting to us because it reminds us that God is going to miss us if we are not in relationship with him. Just like the one sheep out of 100, we are not too small to be missed and sought after if we fall away. It is particularly notable that we don't have to do anything at all to get God's attention. We are not told the lost sheep was bleating for help or searching for the flock, rather, the lost sheep is just wandering off by itself, probably eating some grass (that's all sheep seem to do most of the time) and quite content out on its own. All the work of bringing the lost sheep back into the fold is done by the shepherd, and when the sheep is found the shepherd rejoices. The sheep has no idea of the dangers it is facing in the wilderness alone, but the shepherd does. Similarly, we have no real idea, most of the time, what difference our relationship with God is making in our lives, but God has moved into relationship with us, and scripture tells us that this is for our good, not God's.

But our reading doesn't stop there, Jesus then moves to practical advice in the face of disputes within the church. The advice is all focussed on bringing those who are in dispute back into community with one another. First, we are to talk to anyone who has caused us offence or wronged us. If that doesn't resolve the dispute we are to seek support from other Christians who can come along for a 2nd attempt at resolving the matter in a discussion. If that doesn't work then the dispute should be discussed with the church as a whole and ultimately, if an individual is not behaving in an appropriate manner, the community must let them go.

This is all sound advice; indeed church grievance procedures are based on it the world over, in fact most grievance procedures would read similarly. The intention is to resolve disputes as quickly and as locally as possible. No benefit comes from

escalating a small dispute when all that is needed is a conversation between the people involved. An escalation leads to more pain, a resolution leads to healing. Apart from anything else, no community is comfortable when there are people within it who are at odds with one another. This is true of any group, we are aware when we walk into a room where there is an 'atmosphere' of hostility and our internal reaction is stress. That is as good a reason as any to follow Jesus' advice.

But there is more to it. It is no accident that this reading comes in 2 parts. The advice for dealing with disputes, and the responsibility to keep together the community as much as is possible, this is all in response to the parable that precedes it. Jesus speaks of God's desire to lose no sheep from his flock before detailing how we must play our part in keeping that flock together. God will search for those who have gone astray but we can do much to work in our own communities to maintain unity. Where we are wronged, we have ways to resolve the dispute spelled out for us. Likewise, where we have caused offense or upset to another, we must hear those who would try to tell us. We have a responsibility to share in God's work of unifying the church, we must be part of the solution in a dispute rather than the problem.

So even if we have moments when we think we are better off estranged from someone we find difficult to love, let us remember that God desires that none are lost. The good shepherd will search for the sheep who have gone astray and when they are found, there will be much rejoicing over their return.