

It was a solemn day on the hillside. It always was when this tragedy played out, as it did this time every year. The sheep were now fully grown, no helpless lambs for the predators to pick off at will. The year was ageing, leaving the wolves with less easy pickings. The carnivores grew more brazen in their hunting, more obsessed in their staring at the sheep from the margins. A moment's carelessness by a member of the flock could be fatal at this time of year. The more experienced sheep looked at each other with knowing dread. The human had stopped his work, placed his staff on the ground, eased himself onto a bolder, removed his lunch from his cloak, and mentally switched off. It wasn't really his fault, the sheep reasoned, after all he had been watching them closely all morning. They could forgive his lapse in vigilance. It was what happened next they could not forgive. The hard-nosed realism of economics demanded the shepherd accept his loss, don't throw good money after bad, swallow your medicine, and move on. That is what the prudent shepherds did. The one was gone, snatched by a predator. Nothing could now be done. Re-focus your effort at guarding the ninety-nine. But not this shepherd. Leaving the ninety-nine alone – alone, mind you – he picks up his crook, tucks the hem of his cloak into his belt and strides – all intensity and passion - up the hill and out of sight. Do you hear the bleating of the ninety-nine? Can you feel the panic, the distress, the fear of the flock? It was a solemn day on the hillside.

Of course, it didn't happen. First, it's a parable, a story made up by Jesus. And second, sheep don't think like that. But imagine if they did. What would they be saying to each other as they watched their guardian disappear over the horizon. "Wait", says one, "I thought he loved all of us equally. What makes the idiot who got lost so special? Why is he teacher's pet? Who died and made him king? I say let him be eaten by wolves. I mean, it's a pity and all that, but he can't be so selfish and inconsiderate of the rest of us. We are the good ones, we never strayed, we are the faithful, the loyal, the obedient. We get it – behave right and the shepherd will protect us, wander off and you deserve what's coming to you." "I know, right", says another, "And here's another thing - what's going to happen to us? What if we're attacked? We're helpless. Some shepherd he is. I thought he was supposed to be all goodness and light and love and compassion and justice and fairness. He has his priorities all wrong. The boss ought to fire his good-for-nothing carcass." It's a solemn day on the hillside. If these sheep thought like humans, it would be a fearful, angry, bitter day too.

And that is the point. In the parable they're sheep, in reality they are the Pharisees and teachers of the law, critically watching Jesus extend a welcome to the marginalized, forgiving the sins of the immoral, inviting the outcasts. By extension, they may even be us. The devout and faithful flock. We wouldn't stray from the safety of the shepherd. We would not wander off, lost in our selfishness, wrapped up in our greedy consumption of grass.

The pharisaical sheep blame the strays – the sinners. They blame Jesus too for reaching out to the strays and loving them. His behavior threatens to turn the social

order upside down. The Pharisees, you see, have a kingdom to preserve – a kingdom of power, status, privilege. It is a kingdom built on one solid foundation – they are in charge. They are the guardians of public morality, the keepers of God. They define who God was, they tell you what God demands, they are the ones who interpret life, the universe and everything in it. They have God nailed down, buttoned up, and locked away. This God they preach is a nativist – he probably loves everyone, but they are first among equals. Foreigners, even foreigners living in their land, are not to be trusted, their culture and their ways are suspect, a threat to God's true and pure religion. God, according to his guardians, also has problems with the sick, the disabled, those who had to work on the Sabbath, women, children, people in certain disapproved of occupations. And now here strides Jesus, the Good Shepherd. With a key. And he pushes his way past the Pharisees, approaches the cell where they are holding God captive, and he releases him. God steps out of the prison where the religious have incarcerated him, and it turns out he is actually quite different from the one the Pharisees have proclaimed. A God with a passion for all people with no exceptions. A heart so huge that it bursts with love. A vision so expansive that no one is left out. A plan so grand that the gravest of sinners is the moral equal of the holiest of Pharisees. The name of the least important person on the least significant island in the remotest of oceans is carved on the hands of God. Is it any wonder they try to kill him?

It's a solemn day on the hillside. It's a desperate day in the kitchen. That is the venue for another loss, not this time an animal that has wandered foolishly into danger, but a coin. The owner has ten in all. So losing one of them is actually more serious than the shepherd losing a sheep. He loses just 1% of his flock, she loses 10% of her wealth. But there was possibly more to that coin than just its monetary value. It could be that the coin Jesus has in mind as he tells this story is the decoration on a bride's headdress. It was the custom for a bride to wear a covering with ornamental coins sewn into the edges. These coins were made of gold and they formed part of the dowry that she brought with her. These coins spoke of her value, her reputation. And so she goes to wild extremes to find it. She sweeps the house, moves all the furniture, turns her world upside down, because her world has been turned upside down. So, this lady is not the reckless businessman that the shepherd is, risking 99% of his business to save 1%, but she still has a passionate, emotional attachment to the coin that goes beyond what we'd expect.

A lost sheep and a lost coin. The passage finishes with a lost son – we call him the prodigal, and we read about him earlier in the year. These three tales of lostness are stories of God's uncontrolled, over-the-top, absurdly out-of-proportion love. He waits, he paces, he scours, he searches, he spares no expense, no risk, no effort. The extravagance of a celebration is directly linked to the greatness of the achievement you're celebrating. So when God rejoices so wastefully what does that say about his joy when he finds a lost human?

Those numbers Jesus uses in these stories mean something. There is a reason why Jesus made up this story of 100 hundred sheep instead of 50; why he created this tale of the woman and her 10 coins and not 8. In biblical thinking 10 and 100 stand for

completeness. It's why God gave us Ten Commandments - they are complete, they are not lacking in any way, if you want to add an eleventh there wouldn't be much point because everything you need to create a good and ethical community is contained in those ten. Beautiful totality. So, when the sheep wanders off becomes lost it is not just the forlorn sheep that is in trouble. Jesus is saying that the whole flock suffers. They are no longer whole, no longer complete, things for the 99 are not the way they should be. And when the woman loses her coin the other nine are bereft. They are damaged by the loss of the one. So, these parables are an encouragement to us – the members of the flock, the coins that haven't become detached - to open our hearts and lives to those who are lost – and not just for their sakes, but for ours. We are impoverished without those lost ones. We seek, and invite, and welcome, and embrace, not just because the outsider will benefit from being found and becoming one of Christ's followers, and joining a Christian congregation, but because we also will be better off. Without the stranger, the alien, the outsider, the marginalized, the sinner, the person who is not one of us, we are incomplete. We need them.

There are people who are not here today, who have never set foot in this building who, this time next year, will be regular worshipers. And we will be more complete because of their arrival. And what will they experience when they pluck up the courage to walk through the glass doors. What will they make of being told to turn to page 355 to start the service? How will they feel having to navigate their way around the hymnal and the Prayer Book, especially if they have no experience of a liturgical church? If you notice them struggling, will you help? If they would like to go to coffee hour, but they feel awkward going down alone, will you invite them to join you? And then, when in the undercroft if you see them awkwardly standing in the corner hoping someone will talk to them, will that someone be you? Let me hazard an answer to those questions. "Yes." You will. Because I know you. We have not grown the way we have in recent years without big hearts and warm welcomes. So let's continue our hospitality and our awareness. Not just for the sake of those who have not yet visited us, but because we need them. They may not have a close relationship with the church at this point in their lives, but they have experiences of God, of life, of suffering, of love. They have stories we need to hear if we are to become the people God calls us to be. The 99 sheep need the lost one – they are incomplete without it. The 9 coins need the missing piece, without it they are not whole.

So, I believe that God is calling us today to get off the Pharisee's throne of self-sufficiency and see our need of the outsider. And then, to go and meet her or him, befriend them and invite them to come and share their lives with us, as we do the same with them. But there's more. I've been ordained now 23 years. The most painful thing I know, the thing that causes me to stay awake at night most, the event that crushes my spirit and makes me wonder if I can continue until I retire, is when we lose someone. Sometimes it can be almost unbearable when we lose someone to the grave. But it also hurts when we lose someone to the removals van because their work or their retirement is taking them many miles away. But the sting is sometimes equally acute when they depart for other reasons. That is when I'm forced to look at my welcome, my pastoral care, the things I say and do, to examine if I am part of a problem. We all have

a role to play in seeking the one sheep that wanders. The ushers, the greeters, the staff, and I – we can't keep track of all 600 members of Mt Calvary. Someone may not attend worship for a month and we may not even notice. Each of us is important in caring for the one sheep. So if you sit near someone and you notice they don't show up for three or four weeks, then reach out to them. You could be the person that helps the sheep to remain connected to the flock.

These are stories of celebration. Tales of parties. May we live this week with eyes wide open for lost souls that need to be found, and let us do the work of the Good Shepherd and welcome them home.