

*The angels' joy*

The fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel is famous for recounting three stories that Jesus told – two very short and one a bit longer. The first is a story about a lost sheep, the second about a lost coin, and the third about a lost person and known as the story of the Prodigal Son. Now, that third one, the Prodigal Son, is a little different. In it, as you may recall, a son leaves the family home, taking the inheritance that will be due to him one day, and he heads off into a far country where he squanders his wealth. And here we find an important difference in these three stories. In that story of the wayward son his father does not come after him. He does not leave home and come frantically searching after his son, roaming back streets and asking if anyone has seen his boy. No. He may be tempted to do that but he doesn't. He must wait at home. He must wait, day in day out, and part of his agony is precisely the waiting – waiting until his son comes to his senses and returns. The stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin however are very different. Here the loss of these valuable items prompts a search. The shepherd does not stay with the ninety-nine who are safely gathered in, waiting for the wanderer to return. He does sit there thinking, 'well, it's her own fault. She's wandered off and she'll just have to find her way back – she'll learn!' No, the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness – and that's a dangerous, maybe even a daft thing to do! – and off he goes in search of the wayward sheep. And likewise the woman with her lost coin: she does not sit back and say to herself, 'never mind. It'll turn up.' No. She lights a lamp and she's down on her knees looking under her bed and she's sweeping in the corners desperate to find this lost coin.

That of course is because the sheep is so valuable to the shepherd, as is the coin to the woman. There is this strange bond between shepherd and sheep that compels the shepherd to go in search. And it's been speculated that maybe the lost coin is this woman's dowry or her savings and is therefore of immense value to her. And so they search, the shepherd and the woman, seeking desperately for that which is lost, until it is found. And here we need to remember what it was that prompted these stories Jesus told. At the beginning of the chapter we discover that they were told in response to the complaints of the Pharisees and the scribes about the company Jesus was keeping. He was sharing meals with the riff-raff. His dining habits were honouring law breakers:

tax collectors and sinners - tax collectors who were hated because of their collusion with the Roman occupying forces and sinners who had given up on God's Law and led shameful lives. Jesus 'hung out' with 'these people' – and yet he claimed to be a man of God. Disgusting!

And what I want us to consider from these two stories is the kind of God that they portray - a God who searches and seeks for the lost; a God who prizes and values us so much that he comes after us in order to find us and so that we might find him. And to help us grasp this I would draw your attention to today's date which you have probably noticed: the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, or 9/11 as we call it. Yes, it's exactly 15 years since that dreadful day from which the world has not yet recovered. The actual day on which it happened in 2001 was a Tuesday and I was fascinated to read of one American pastor's struggle to find something to say from the pulpit the following Sunday. The passages set for that Sunday were the same as today's, including these stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin. And this pastor told of how he despaired of making any connection between those terrible events and these stories. And he was about to give up and find some other text when he found himself watching the news, and he saw the firefighters and the rescue workers hauling at the rubble and seeking desperately for survivors in the ruins. And every now and again a cry would go up - another person had been found alive! And then they were being lifted lovingly out of the debris and people were cheering and embracing and there was such joy – and suddenly that minister saw the connection between this text and that nightmare. Both were about seeking and searching and saving the lost. Indeed one of the desperately sad sides of this event is that of the more than 3000 people who perished that day over 1000 have never been found – no trace whatsoever. No trace, no body, no grave, no closure. But in the furious searching of the rescuers, the frantic, desperate desire to find perhaps we see an image of God who prizes and values us so much that he grieves that we are lost and searches and seeks us out, like a shepherd with a sheep or a woman with a coin. And when it says at the start of our reading that the Pharisees and scribes were indignant, complaining that 'This fellow welcome sinners...' the original Greek word used for 'welcome' has a sense of drawing into one's arms, like a kind of embrace – just as the father does to the son at his homecoming in the story of the prodigal son. Well, behold your God, whose response in Jesus Christ to the sinners and the cheats and the lawbreakers of his day was not to discard them but rather to reach out to them and to draw them into his arms.

And that was offensive to the holy people of Jesus' day, and I guess if we think it through them it might be offensive to us too. For what is pictured here in the combination of the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin and the lost son is a God who is less concerned to punish and destroy sinners and more concerned to reach out to them and to find them so that they might repent and be changed. This is a God who rejoices with the angels in heaven when one sinner who repents, who changes, who turns their life around.

That takes us back to 9/11 for that terrible day prompted, along with the search for the victims, a very different kind of search. In response to what had happened President George W. Bush spoke about smoking out the terrorists and bringing them to justice, and from then on massive efforts were made to find Osama Bin Laden, at great cost. A search mission was launched which culminated eventually in Abbottabad in Pakistan where Bin Laden was shot dead by American Navy Seals on May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011. And so the search ended - the search to find and to root out and to destroy. And the raid was welcomed by many - by 90% of the American public and by the United Nations and NATO and the European Union, and it was condemned by others, including two thirds of public opinion in Pakistan. And we might discuss the rights or wrongs of how all this was done but few would deny the legitimacy of that search for the man behind such an appalling evil. The blood of the victims cried from the ground. What must be said however by us as Christians is that alongside that search to find and to kill Osama Bin Laden there was another search - one that was going on in the dark depths of Bin Laden's soul. It was the search of the shepherd for the lost sheep. It was the search of the woman for the lost coin - the search of the Creator who longed to draw into his arms this creature who was so terribly and utterly lost. Maybe this is where things get offensive, for surely on the basis of this text from Luke's Gospel we must say that the first thought of this God towards Osama Bin Laden was not that he should be destroyed but that he should repent. On the basis of this text we must surely say that God's first thought towards this lost child of his was not that he should be found and executed, but that his true humanity should be found - his true humanity which had been lost to hatred and violence and murder. For there is more joy in the presence of the angels of God when a sinner repents than when a sinner gets their just deserts.

You see, we are rightly concerned about justice. The world needs justice. The victims need justice. The perpetrators need to be brought to justice.

And we believe that God is a God of justice. But what we read of here in this chapter in Luke goes beyond justice. It is about restoration. It's about repentance which turns us round from the wrong direction in which we are heading and sets us on the right path. And God grieves for the victims of human sin and evil but God also grieves for the perpetrators and what has become of them. God sees us in our sinful state and recalls beautiful human beings created in the divine image, delicately endowed with divine characteristics. And what has become of us prompts God not to a desire for punishment and destruction but rather a desire to seek us out and to restore what has been lost and to make us once again glorious children of God. That is what these stories are about. And I would like to think that this concern for restoration is reflected in our approach to criminal justice and to prison. Yes, the demands of justice must be met and people must pay their debt to society and the law must run its course. But society rejoices with the angels not when the cell door is locked and the key thrown away but when someone repents and is rehabilitated.

In our service this morning we are blessed to have two items from the choir. The first is a prayer by William Blake called the Divine Image which is very apt for this anniversary of 9/11. It contains the verse:

And all must love the human form  
 In heathen, Turk or Jew,  
 Where mercy, love and pity dwell,  
 There God is dwelling too.

In old fashioned, dated language it is a prayer for mercy, pity, peace and love between those of all faiths and of none. You have a copy in your order of service which you are invited to take home with you and it might prompt you to pray this week for peace in our troubled world. The other piece by the choir, which we will hear in a minute, is a prayer for grace:

to amend our sinful lives;  
 to decline from sin, and incline to virtue,  
 that we may walk in an upright heart  
 before thee this day and evermore.

That is a prayer of repentance. It is a prayer that asks that we might amend our sinful lives and incline to virtue. It's a prayer that having been sought and found by God, drawn into God's arms, we may repent and be restored and redeemed to our full stature as beloved children of God. Amen.

Holy and loving God,  
on this anniversary of 9/11 we pray for a world  
that still feels the effects of that day;  
a world where Islamic jihadis perpetrate outrages  
on innocent people,  
where hate is stirred between people of different faiths,  
where religion becomes an engine for conflict and murder.  
Forgive us that our response to evil so often  
only makes things worse, fanning the fires of hatred.  
We pray today for world leaders  
who must grapple with the problems of terrorism...  
and of Syria...  
and of Israel and the Palestinians...  
and of refugees.  
O God give to our leaders wisdom  
and the spirit of co-operation in combatting evil.  
We pray for a world order where nations will live  
in mutual honour and respect  
and where people will not be provoked to evil.  
We pray for terrorists,  
for those inspired by ideologies of hatred,  
for those who take the name of God in vain  
as they kill in God's name.  
And we pray that they may be changed  
and set free by repentance,  
that thee may be joy in heaven...  
And we pray for all victims of terror,  
for those who have lost loved ones,  
for those who have been injured and bereaved.  
God bring to them the peace that only you can bring.  
We pray these things in the name of the  
God of peace and reconciliation –  
The God revealed in Jesus Christ, the Lord,  
In whose name we pray. Amen.