

If John 3:16 is the most important passage in the Bible, Luke 15 stands alongside it. There is **one** single message flowing through the entire Bible, *The scale and scope of God's love, mercy and justice which has framed human history, and shapes our very existence, yesterday, today and always, is BEYOND human thought and imagination.*

Through the ages, Moses, Nehemiah, David, Joel and many others have repeated this, *The LORD our God is compassionate and gracious, extremely slow to anger, abounding in love.*¹ God is not defined by His anger. It is a gross error to believe, human history is shaped by God's anger.

Luke 15 is one of my favourite passages. It is so rich in content and meaning. Every time I study it, the excitement of discovering another ray of light in the greater glory of God, is palpable.

This chapter is best taken-in slowly, because of its rich flavours. Today we examine verses 1-10 and next Sunday we shall examine verses 11-32.

Luke 14 set the scene: at the home of a wealthy, prominent Pharisee, a Sabbath meal was laid. On entering, Jesus healed a man with dropsy (4), addressed guests who were jockeying for a prime seat at the table (7-11), then the host's motives for inviting those present (12-14), followed by a parable in response to someone who shouted, "*praise the Lord*" (15-24), and finally to the gathered crowd (25-35).

Luke begins ch. 15 describing the tension in the room. Among those listening, were *Tax collectors and other notorious sinners*, a phrase which describes a section of society who were well to do, but kept out of *polite* company, because their loyalties were dubious, and their ethics

¹ Nehemiah 9:31; Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Psalm 86:5; Psalm 86:15; Joel 2:13

questionable. They were hungry for Jesus' teaching, to hear a non-judgemental message, of inclusion and not exclusion, but the Pharisees grumbled, Jesus was ignoring them.

Verse 3 has two important clues: *So Jesus told **them** (the audience: Pharisees and teachers of the law) **this** (one single) story.* Jesus is speaking to religious leaders who understood everything He said, but became more angry and intolerant of Him until we read they resolved to kill Him (ch. 19).

The **Shepherd** is a prominent, meaningful and powerful metaphor in the Bible, unique to the culture of the Middle East. While working with the Bible Society, I attended a global meeting of Translators. A group from Paraguay narrated how they found it difficult to translate the Bible's understanding of **shepherd**. In their culture, the closest they came to a shepherd was a horse-riding stockman who herded several thousand cattle to a **stockyard** or rail head, where they were counted and sent onto abattoirs. They would tolerate a maximum "*loss in transit*" of 2% , a concept alien to the shepherd of the Bible.

Human history starts with two occupations. The sons of Adam and Eve, the first son *Abel became a shepherd, while Cain, a farmer, cultivated the ground.*²

The "**Shepherd**" motif in the Bible was used to convey a unique style of leadership. We are familiar with Jesus' declaration, *I am the Good Shepherd. My sheep know my voice and follow me.*³

In the OT, God is the "Shepherd" and Psalm 23 describes *God the Good Shepherd*. God appointed shepherds, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David, not because they were good at being shepherds, but because they

² Genesis 4:2(b)

³ John 10:11-18

were will to first, experience God as Shepherd and learn from Him, His unique leadership as the Good Shepherd, before governing and leading His people.

Jesus' audience of Pharisees and teachers of the law would have perked up listening to His opening line, *"A man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do?"* This is a loaded question. A short while prior, Jesus had asked if they would rescue a fallen herd animal on the Sabbath, and now a story about a man losing one out of a hundred sheep.

The Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law would have been very familiar with the words of Ezekiel chapter 34, *What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks under your care. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep? You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bandaged the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty...* words very familiar to Pharisees and Teachers, who thought it referred to those to whom they had delegated charge of looking after "the flock", not them.

Now a voice that makes them uncomfortable, *A man has a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away* What kind of shepherd cannot keep watch over a 100 sheep, and lets one slip away? *Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost, until he finds it?*

If the shepherd were a horse-riding stockman in Paraguay in charge of 1,000 head of cattle, one lost is well within the 2% loss-in-transit, and he would be happy to let it go.

This shepherd is in no doubt what to do: he is confident to leave the 99, who like all sheep when the shepherd is away, huddle together, the weaker on the inside and the stronger on the outside to protect themselves, and go **to** search the one lost. The Shepherd knows the direction the sheep might have gone and that's the track he takes, *until he finds it*. He is committed to locating and finding the lost one, *and WHEN he finds it... he joyfully hoists it onto his shoulders*.

This has to be **the** most endearing image of a Shepherd - carrying sheep on their shoulders. Having found them and laid them on his shoulders, the Shepherd is homebound, rejoicing! He is not reprimanding the sheep for going astray, nor complaining or groaning under the burden, but rejoicing in a kind of triumph, and carrying them as an athlete might carry trophy of victory. ***I have found the one lost!***

The audience would not have know it then, but we definitely know it now, when a shepherd carries a sheep in the crook of his neck, holding his front and hind legs on either side of his neck, his posture is the identical to one carrying the cross (not the stake, but the cross). The Shepherd King is the Servant Leader who carries the burden of His people, people who have wandered away from the Truth, who have misrepresented God and His Son Jesus, who have been broken in mind and spirit, and who are suffering as broken people. The Shepherd King, the Servant Leader carries home, every one lost, in the same way as Jesus carried the cross to His death, in order that He carry us back into God's home. Powerful imagery!

'Come celebrate with me because I have found my ONE lost sheep!' In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner (tax collectors and others) who repents

and returns to God, than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!

Each of us who has a personal and corporate relationship with God through Christ, is called to God's mission, to join Him in "rescuing", bringing back, those who have strayed from the Family of God. We read last Sunday, there is always room for more at God's banquet table.

This is the question facing each **Christian** who declares a faith in Jesus Christ: *Are we personally committed to the mission of God in the world around us?*, helping identify each one who has wandered away from God's family home, **then** with God's help, bringing them back, rejoicing that another seat at God's eternal banquet table has been filled?

If we do not have this commitment, we have misunderstood God, His work and His purpose. As we noted earlier this year, if we are not worshipping and following the God of the Bible, we are worshipping an idol of our own creation.

AMEN.