

Last month we looked at the parable of the prodigal son in some detail through the lens of the father, the younger son and his elder brother without referencing the two parables which immediately precede it, which we've just heard – the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. All three parables culminate in a big celebratory party being thrown.

A few days ago, I was woken up around midnight by some nearby partying people as they let off their exploding fireworks and rockets. I was not a happy bunny as I lay there wide awake over the next couple of hours. It could have been worse. It might have been one of the very noisy parties thrown by a certain neighbour's university aged children. They tend to go on through to daybreak and the revellers take no heed of the local byelaws regarding noise.

I remember asking myself on several occasions: what right do they have keeping everyone – by which I meant me – awake with their over-the-top celebrations? But then I also remembered the exuberant parties that I had thrown or had thrown on my behalf over the years including my 21st, my marriage to Jane and the one you threw for my ordination. Now that was some party! And yes – 3 parties in 70 years may be one too many!!

So, am I just a natural born party pooper or am I more like the Pharisees we have just heard about, that partying is fine, so long as only the right people are invited, and everyone sticks to the permitted rules?

And as our opening verse shows, that really is the crux of the matter as far as the Pharisees were concerned: Here was Jesus, claiming to be a prophet of God's Kingdom mixing with the wrong sort of people: the despised tax collectors; the society outcasts and religious law-breakers; heaven forbid, maybe even gentiles – sinners all! How, could Jesus mix with and tolerate such behaviour from these disreputable people? And it wasn't just a one-off instance; Jesus was repeatedly found celebrating with such people.

But of course, the Pharisees missed the point entirely. Jesus was not advocating that such people should be unilaterally accepted as they were. Like John the Baptist before him, Jesus was preaching a gospel of repentance. Sinners must repent – the lost sheep is rescued; the coin is found, and the younger brother comes to his senses and returns home seeking his father's forgiveness.

I think we can all agree that the coin and sheep symbolise the outcasts and members of the underclass that I mentioned earlier, and Jesus is quite emphatic - all of heaven rejoices whenever a single lost coin or sheep is found. That is far more important than the nine or ninety-nine who don't need to.

Jesus is saying that by him feasting and partying with these folk whom the Pharisees deem to be unclean and unholy, not only is he throwing the equivalent of a welcome home party but also ensuring that they never feel lost again.

Jesus is redefining what repentance means and, as a consequence, he is saying his actions on earth respond to and reflect precisely God's heavenly love which is freely offered to all who repent. What's more it doesn't matter that people are lost in different ways; the sheep wandered off; the coin was presumably lost by accident and the younger son through his life choices. Three different ways of becoming lost but with only one outcome on being found – heavenly celebration.

I think it is also interesting to note that whilst the response to each item being lost is different, the motivation is consistent – the persistent desire to reveal God’s love to all of humankind, not just a special chosen few.

Scripture resonates with powerful images of God’s love, but I think collectively, these three parables are second only to the image of the cross in expressing that love. The missing sheep really mattered to the shepherd; the coin was so important to the woman that she simply wouldn’t give up until it was found and perhaps most telling of all, the father who had waited so patiently suddenly runs with arms out wide to kiss and hug his son ‘who was dead and is alive again’.

The message is clear: God’s love and grace is available to all, not just the select few. Cue God’s celebratory feast described in our Isaiah reading:

“On this mountain the Lord almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples; a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death for ever. The sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people, from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken”

In closing, try to imagine the joyous feelings those repentant sinners must have had when the penny, or should that be drachma drops, when realization finally dawned that they were the coin, the sheep and the younger brother and that Jesus’s ministry and teaching was modelling God’s freely offered and unconditional love.

The prophecy that the shroud of disgrace under which they had lived for much of their lives is being destroyed by the forgiveness offered through Jesus. Not only that, but their name is written in bold type on the invite list to that wonderful heavenly feast.

It’s only a few weeks away and someone had to be the first....as a church....let’s make a New Year’s resolution....to be hospitable, caring and loving in all we do to assist in ensuring the name of everyone we minister to is included on God’s heavenly feast invite list.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen

Rev. Terry Ward-Hall, 7 November 2021