

**“THE LOST SHEEP”**  
*Luke 15:1-10*

This is perhaps one of the best known and best loved chapters of Luke's Gospel outside the stories of the nativity and the passion. *Chapter 15* has these three wonderful stories of the Lost Sheep (also found in Matthew's Gospel), the Lost Coin and the Lost Son. This morning we're going to look at the first two of those stories. The story of the Shepherd is one of those that sticks in my mind with a clear image – from a *Ladybird* book I received as a Sunday School prize many, many years ago. Little Eloise may well end up with her view of the stories of the Bible similarly coloured by the pictures in the Bible she was given this morning. But this is not simply a nice story about a gentle shepherd who loves his sheep. In the context in which Jesus told it there were all kinds of other things going on and if we understand them it can help us to see something of the impact this story had on his first listeners.

Here we see some of Luke's themes coming together – the feasting (which has been a feature of the past couple of chapters), the grace of God, and the concern for the outsider, the lost individual. Right at the beginning of this section Jesus seems to make a contrast between the “*tax collectors and sinners*” and the “*Pharisees and teachers of the Law*”. The Pharisees, for whom Temple and Law were the marks of acceptance into the purposes of God, cannot entertain the idea that these ne'er-do-wells might be worth spending time with or on. Their comment about Jesus' mixing with them is surely spoken with disdain. And as to actually eating with them – well, that was really beyond the pale. The strict laws about who could eat with whom were apparently being cast aside by Jesus. Eating with someone signified that you accepted and recognised that person as worthy of your company.

So Jesus tells these stories to illustrate the fact that the grace of God extends even to those who are on the margins, those whom the Pharisees would consider lost – who we might think today are beyond the reach of the Church. And the Kingdom feast is a celebration of the welcoming of the “lost” into God's redemptive love. Here we see two lost items – a sheep and a coin. I don't believe there is any particular significance in the choice of these two things – Jesus has simply selected things that most of his listeners would have been familiar with. They would all have seen the flocks of sheep around on the hillsides and they would all have seen the silver coins which the woman had. Many people have suggested that the coins the woman lost were part of a wedding head-dress and had a great sentimental value for her. Or it may simply have been that the woman lost part of her housekeeping money – one silver coin (a drachma) was worth about a day's wage, so to lose it was a bit of a blow. If that is the case, then we are looking here at two people who run the risk of losing an important part of their livelihood, because whatever other sentimental ideas we have about fluffy lambs and the shepherd's great love for them, a sheep represented a pretty hefty investment for him or his master. Neither the shepherd nor the woman wanted to lose their

sheep or coin for either sentimental or economic reasons, despite the fact that they represented only 1% or 10% of what they had.

The owners of these lost things are very concerned about them, then. They're aren't quite so worried about the others – they are safe. The other nine coins or ninety-nine sheep are doing what they should be doing - sitting on the shelf or staying in the flock (probably with another shepherd). But the owners set out to look for them – and they do so with a great deal of enthusiasm. The shepherd leaves all the rest of the sheep and “*goes after the sheep until he finds it.*” The woman lights a lamp and sweeps the house – not an easy task with dirt floors – until she finds it. You know the effort you put into finding your car keys or your cheque card, don't you? The cushions come off the chairs, the drawers are emptied, the pockets of your coats and jackets are turned out. That's what was going on here, only more so.

It sort of goes without saying that the initiative in each situation was taken by the owner. The coin couldn't get itself back into her purse. The sheep couldn't send up a distress flare – although it was a bit more capable than the coin, of course! Great effort was expended by the owners in an attempt to get back what was lost.

And that tells us a great deal about God as he seeks those who are lost, who are outside the kingdom. The initiative is entirely his. Yes, we may realise – as the sheep might have done – that we are lost, but we can't do anything about it. Look at *Romans 5:8* or at *1 John 4:10*. God comes looking for us. The onus is on him. And it took a great deal of effort for the search to get under way. Just as the shepherd scoured the countryside, aware of the danger that there might be wild predators or hidden ravines; just as the woman had to turn her house upside down, so Jesus was called upon to make an incredible effort to bring back the lost.

Firstly, he had to leave the security and comfort and glory of heaven, venturing out into the unknown as a human being, with all the dangers that presented to him – as we read in *Philippians 1:6-8*. Then he had to cope with the grind and hassles of living from day to day in this world for thirty odd years. And finally he had to undergo the humiliation and agony of death by crucifixion in order to provide a way of hope for the lost to return to God. That's what we'll be remembering as we take communion in a few minutes. It wasn't easy, even for the Son of God! Tramping across the countryside and sweeping the house were actually nothing in comparison. But he did it for you, for me. He did it because we are important to God, God wants us to be part of the Kingdom. The kingdom is incomplete without us, because when God created the perfect world, men and women, you and I, were very much a part of it - and he wants us back there. You matter to God!

And when we are found, when things are back as they should be – one hundred sheep in the fold, ten coins in the purse – then it's a time for celebration. The Kingdom feast can actually take place. The shepherd and the woman call together their friends and neighbours and say “*Rejoice with me: I have found my lost sheep/coin.*” It's a cause for celebration. Things are complete again. And the Kingdom feast will not be complete until everyone who should be there is there – not just the pious Jews and Pharisees, but the tax collectors and sinners as well. That's why there's such rejoicing in heaven. The righteous are already there: but the lost are now coming in, the ones who weren't expected, but who made it after all. The ones who may even be surprised to find themselves there.

It may be that this morning there are some of you here who don't really think you have any place in God's Kingdom – in fact, you're quite surprised to find yourself in church, even. Well, all I would want to say to you this morning is that God loves you and he's looking out for you. At the moment, you may feel that you don't need God. Well, he's still wanting to welcome you. Or at the moment, you may feel you're desperate for some help, some peace, some guidance. God's reaching out to you and assuring you that he cares. There's all sorts of things that have are happening as part of this service this morning: if you remember nothing else, remember that God is looking out for you and he wants you to know that he loves you. I pray that you will be ready to respond to him and that you too will be able to experience all the joy of being part of God's Kingdom.