

God's 'Little Ones' Matthew 18:1-5 & 10-14

Jesus tells a story about a man and some sheep. In the story we learn that the man owns a hundred sheep, and that they are out on the hills. Now, I'm guessing that most of us don't know that much about the sheep farming habits in Palestine two thousand years ago, so perhaps instead we could picture a Welsh sheep farmer with a flat cap and a quilted jacket riding round on his quad bike (as they do these days) with a bright-eyed sheep dog sitting on the back. And it's raining. Because it always rains in Wales, doesn't it?

So, the farmer goes out to check on the sheep who are roaming all over the side of a hill. With good use of the quad bike and the sheep dog he's soon got them rounded up and heading for a slate sheep pen nestling into the hillside. As they bleat and squeeze between the stone walls to enter the pen one by one he has the opportunity for a quick glance at their condition and keeps a count. 96, 97, 98, 99....

Oh dear. The farmer realises that he's one short. There are only ninety nine of the woolly little critters here. There should be a hundred in this group. By now it's absolutely chucking it down with rain –as it does in Wales, particularly in the hills- and the farmer really wants to get home to the warm and dry farmhouse. He might be tempted to think, 'never mind, what's one sheep when I've got ninety nine others'. But instead with a sigh he calls to the dog to hop up, and heads back out on his quad bike to look for the one missing sheep.

Eventually he finds it behind a rock lying on its back – 'cast' as it's called, unable to get up, bleating pathetically at him and the dog. (because once a sheep's on its back it's had it. Looking for mint sauce!)

He hauls the sheep the right way up, points it in the general direction of the others, and with the help of the dog and the quad bike shoos it back down to the pen, full of satisfaction, happiness even, that this one sheep hasn't come to any harm. Now it's safe in the pen with the others.

And at the very end of this story that Jesus tells, he says to the people listening 'in the same way your father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost'. God doesn't want any little ones to be lost.

Ah, that's a nice story, we might think. But who are these 'little ones'? Are they the sheep in the story? Well, no! Jesus tells us about the sheep simply to make his point. Jesus is very good at telling stories (or parables) to get his point across.

To find out who the 'little ones' are we have to go back to the beginning of the bible passage that I read a few minutes ago.

And it all starts off with a question. Jesus' followers want to know who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? In other words, who are the most important in God's eyes? Who are the movers and shakers, who are the ones that are getting noticed?

Perhaps Jesus' followers are wanting to make a list of the top people, a bit like those lists that are published in the newspapers every now and again - the top one hundred rich list, or the fifty most influential business leaders, or whatever it might be. Perhaps the disciples are hoping that they themselves might be very important in God's eyes. After all they've followed Jesus round for a good while now. That's got to count for something, hasn't it? So they ask him who is the most important in God's eyes.

I suspect that when Jesus hears the disciple's question he wants to scream with frustration, because the fact that they're even asking it means they haven't understood what he's been trying to teach them over the last couple of years.

Well, there's no record that Jesus does scream with frustration. Instead he answers them with a visual aid. He calls a little child out of the crowd to stand with him. 'Look! he says, 'unless you're like a little child, one of these little ones, you won't be part of God's plan. But if you're like a little child, like one of these little ones, you'll be high up the list as far as God is concerned. And anyone who welcomes a little child, a little one, is welcoming me.'

So now we know that 'little ones' are children precious to God. Children have a special place in the kingdom as far as God is concerned. They're so important, in fact, to God that he wants every single one of them to be safe with him. Like the farmer who cares about each sheep.

This morning we've had the pleasure of seeing a 'little one' be brought by her parents for a blessing. Sophia is a little one who is precious to Dave & Maria and their families. She's precious to us here at Wade Street Church. She's even more precious to God.

The fact that Sophia is much loved by her family is obvious. She's a huge part of Dave & Maria's life, as she should be. And in general we're pretty good these days at making children important in our families. We give them lots of time and attention. We often give them lots of things. We listen to them and take account of their views.

But that hasn't always been the case, has it? Not that many years ago children used to be important only if they earned some money for the family. You only have to pop along to the museum of childhood at Sudbury to see that. (and give your child a go at being a chimney sweep!) Children were as the saying goes 'seen and not heard'. And in Jesus' day children weren't important at all. They didn't have any sort of status, any sort of rights until they became adults. They weren't seen or heard.

So bearing all that in mind, the point Jesus is making in this story is *very* surprising! He is saying that the people who have no rights, no importance, no significance, no worth in society, they are the ones who are the most important in God's eyes.

And now perhaps the story of the farmer going back out to look for one sheep makes a bit more sense. Even if the other ninety nine sheep are safe, the one lost one is still important.

God doesn't want any of the little ones, the least important people in the world, to be lost because they're the most important as far as he is concerned.

You see, God's way for the world is a topsy-turvy one compared to ours. Or rather, ours is a topsy-turvy way compared to God's. It was hard at times for Jesus' followers to understand and accept, and it can be tricky for us too. But Jesus came to show that there was a different way of living. He pointed his disciples, his followers towards it, and he can point us if we let him too.

I wonder whether any of this story has struck a chord with you? Let's think firstly about the sheep. Imagine you're one of those sheep on the hillside. Are you safe and secure tucked up in the sheep pen? Or do you feel that you've wandered off and need rescuing? Have you lost your way? Do you need finding, and setting back on your feet and guiding into the safety of the pen?

Because if you do need rescuing let me assure you that you matter to God. He won't give up on you even if you give up on yourself. You matter so much to him that he'll go out of his way (as in the story) to find you.

Secondly let's think about how important we think we are! Some people think they've 'made it' in life. They want to be on the 'great' list. Perhaps you want to know how you're doing in the pecking order, and you would be up there with the disciples asking the question.

Well if that's the case then Jesus' teaching here is a wake-up call. A reminder that the things we count as important don't rate as far as God is concerned. The values of the world are turned on their head.

And right at the other end of the spectrum, some people think they're nothing. If that's the case for you then be assured of God's love for you. You are one of his precious little ones.

Jesus said 'whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child in my name welcomes me.'

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Matthew 18:1-5 & 10-14

Jesus tells a story about a man and some sheep. In the story we learn that the man owns a hundred sheep, and that they are out on the hills. But when he goes out to check on them the man realises that he's one short, so he goes out to look for the missing sheep. When he finds the missing one he's really happy.

Jesus ends the story by saying 'in the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost'. But who are these 'little ones'? Are they the sheep in the story? Well, no. Jesus tells us about the sheep simply to make his point. To find out who the 'little ones' are we have to go back to the beginning of the bible passage.

And it all starts off with a question. Jesus' followers want to know who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. In other words, who are the most important in God's eyes? Perhaps the disciples are hoping that they themselves might be important. After all they've followed Jesus round for a good while now.

In answer, Jesus calls a little child out of the crowd to stand with him. 'Look!' he says, 'unless you're like a little child, one of these little ones, you won't be part of God's plan. But if you're like a little child, like one of these little ones, you'll be high up the list as far as God is concerned. And anyone who welcomes a little child, a little one, is welcoming me.'

So now we know that 'little ones' are children precious to God. These days we're pretty good at making children important in our families. We give them lots of time and attention. We often give them lots of things. We listen to them and take account of their views. But that hasn't always been the case. Children should be 'seen and not heard' was the rule until not very long ago, and in Jesus' day children weren't important at all. They didn't have any sort of status, any sort of rights until they became adults. They weren't seen or heard.

So bearing that in mind, the point Jesus is making in this story is *very* surprising. He is saying that the people who have no rights, no importance, no significance, no worth in society, they are the ones who are the most important in God's eyes.

And now perhaps the story of the farmer going back out to look for one sheep makes a bit more sense. Even if the other ninety nine sheep are safe, the one lost one is still important. God doesn't want any of the little ones, the least important people in the world, to be lost because they're the most important as far as he is concerned.

God's way for the world is a topsy-turvy one compared to ours. Or rather, ours is a topsy-turvy way compared to God's. It was hard at times for Jesus' followers to understand and accept, and it can be tricky for us too. But Jesus came to show that there was a different way of living. He pointed his disciples, his followers towards it, and he can point us if we let him too.

Questions for discussion are on the reverse of this sheet

For Discussion

1. Think of a time when you have 'wandered off'. What caused it? How did God bring you back into the 'fold'?
2. How do we measure 'greatness' in our society? What about in church life? How do these measures differ from God's?
3. Children are given a great deal of importance today. Is that right?
4. Who are the 'little ones' in our society?

How can we make a difference to these 'little ones'? What could we do as individuals and as a church?