

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 53”

Matthew 18:10-14

Here's Jesus again with some more teaching about life in the Kingdom of God. Remember, he's been showing people what this Kingdom might look like with his healings and exorcisms, getting rid of the evil that has tainted God's good creation and helping people to live life to the full as God intended. And his disciples, after three years of watching and listening and wondering have been asking some questions about such things as the pecking order in the Kingdom and what might be in it for them. In this eighteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is giving some teaching about what relationships are to be like in the Kingdom, how the followers of the Kingly Messiah get on with one another.

Last week, we saw how humility is vital to that, giving people some ideas about how their attitudes to status, to other people and to sin will provide a foundation for life together. One of the major themes of that was trying to ensure that the “little people” are not overlooked and not given cause to sin (v6) because of the attitudes of others, who can easily become arrogant or dismissive of them. And the short section we've looked at today touches on the idea of pastoral care in its widest sense.

The word “pastoral” comes from “pastor”, the Latin word for “shepherd”, so Jesus' illustration is very appropriate for that as he takes the example of a shepherd in what is probably one of his best-known parables. Most people would remember this from Luke's version of it, in *Luke 15*, but here there is a rather different emphasis, which we'll come back to in a bit. It's possible Matthew took the story and put it in here to help make a point about what Jesus was teaching, but perhaps more likely that Jesus – like many preachers and teachers – used the same illustrations and stories to make slightly different points in different places.

Anyway, he begins by saying that his followers should never “*look down on*” or be dismissive of the little ones. There's a clear nuance of contempt in this word and Jesus is anxious that those who are vulnerable, fragile, perhaps new to the faith or rather shaky in their faith should not be further marginalised by the attitudes to them of other Christians in the community. Those who may already be close to the edge, wavering in their commitment or struggling to make sense of stuff shouldn't be made to feel any worse by those who have apparently got it all sorted out. Just this week, I had a conversation with someone who was telling me about one of her friends who had been so badly let down by the church (not this one) that she was feeling very hurt and very marginalised. There are always those in a congregation who are struggling to cope and their treatment by other Christians who “*look down on*” them or who ignore them completely further alienates them.

So Jesus likens their situation to that of a sheep and its shepherd. As we've said, this story is very much like the one Jesus tells in *Luke 15*. There, though, he is talking to the Pharisees and is clearly making some points about evangelism. Here he is talking to his disciples and the emphasis is different. In Luke's version, Jesus talks about the shepherd losing the sheep. In Matthew's version here, the sheep is said to have "*wandered off*". Once again, we're dealing with a word that has strong implications that aren't fully expressed in our English translations. Wherever this word is used in the New Testament and in Greek translations of the Old Testament, it is clearly to do with being deceived and deluded. The idea is that the sheep has been naive, has been stupid enough to take the wrong path, has actually been enticed away from the flock. The Old Testament prophets often use this vocabulary of "wandering off" when they are talking about God's people rejecting him or going off to worship other gods.

Jesus is talking about the little people whose faith is easily undermined or whose commitment to him is not terribly strong – either because they are young in the faith or because they've been undermined by their circumstances or their situation. It's very easy for people like that to be seduced away from Jesus. And it can happen to anyone. All kinds of things can worm their way into our lives and cause us to take our eyes off Jesus, so we all need to be aware of the danger to ourselves but, particularly here, we need to be loving and compassionate to those whom we can see are in need of help. It's so easy sometimes to look down on those who are struggling and to criticise their "lack of commitment" or their wavering faith. That's definitely not the way of the Kingdom, says Jesus. Such little people are to be found and drawn back into the fold.

In many versions of the Bible – including our pew Bibles – you'll find that *vll* is missing. It might be there in a footnote at the bottom of the page or in a marginal reference. If you haven't got it, it says that Jesus came to save the lost, to help those who had wandered away from God's paths and bring them back to the safety and security of the Kingdom community. In fact, Jesus – or the shepherd – is prepared to look out for the one individual, the one lost sheep, who represents a very small percentage of the flock, but who is vital to the flock being complete. Instead of thinking that he's got ninety-nine safe, so one lost one isn't going to make much difference, he goes off and does all he can to bring it back. It's not because he loves that one more than all the others, but because it's vital to keep all the flock whole and together.

God does not want one single "*little one*" to be lost. And that word "lost" is used here in the way that you'd talk about a ship being lost when it sinks or a soldier being lost when he's killed. It's not that you don't know where they are: it's that they have perished. God doesn't want a single person to perish, to lose out on the gift of an eternity spent with him. In fact, it's the very same word that is translated "*perish*" in *John 3:16*.

So this is one of those little passages where there is really only one point: I can't really spin it out any further! The clear message Jesus is giving to his followers here is that, following the example of God, who loves every person individually, and Jesus, who was sent into this world to do something about it and show in action what was on God's heart, all those who call themselves followers of him should be involved in it too.

To all of us here today there is both encouragement and challenge. If you are one of the struggling ones, one of the "little people", remember that God loves you just as he loves anyone and he does not want you to wander off and lose out on all the good things he has planned for you. And if you are not currently one of the struggling ones, don't look down on those who are. Even if they have wandered off partly due to their own actions and attitudes, the main thing is to try and help them get back. We should be doing all we can – all of us, not just the leaders of the church – to support and encourage them and to keep them as part of the flock. That may seem as inconvenient and as difficult as it would have done to the shepherd who had to scramble all over the place trying to bring back the sheep that had wandered off, but it's what God wants of us.

And if we're talking about inconvenience and difficulty, just remember what Jesus went through to draw you back to himself, to bring you back from your wandering. I used to quote a passage from Richard Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor* quite a lot, but I haven't mentioned it for a very long time, so let me finish with these words, written by Baxter in 1656 for a meeting of ministers in Worcestershire.

Oh, then, let us hear these arguments of Christ, whenever we feel ourselves grow dull and careless: 'Did I die for these souls, and wilt not thou look after them? Were they worth my blood, and are they not worth thy labour? Did I come down from heaven to earth, "to seek and to save that which was lost;" and wilt thou not go to the next door, or street, or village, to seek them? How small is thy condescension and labour compared to mine! I debased myself to this, but it is thy honour to be so employed. Have I done and suffered so much for their salvation, and was I willing to make thee a fellow-worker with me, and wilt thou refuse to do that little which lieth upon thy hands?' Every time we look upon our congregations, let us believingly remember that they are the purchase of Christ's blood, and therefore should be regarded by us with the deepest interest and the most tender affection.

(Richard Baxter: *The Reformed Pastor* pp131,132)

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Questions for discussion

1. Look at the version of this story in *Luke 15*. What differences can you spot between the two versions? Why might that be?
2. What sorts of thing cause followers of Jesus to "wander off"? How can we guard against them?
3. Why should God/Jesus/the shepherd/we bother with trying to get back the individuals who wander off?
4. At what point (if any) do we give up on those who wander off?
5. As a community of disciples, how can we best ensure that no-one is lost?
6. What might you do as a result of reading this story?