

Sermon for 18th Sunday after Trinity. Bad Company, Sheep, and Foolishness.
(Held Over Readings)

Psalm 51: 1 - 12

1 Have mercy on me, O God,

according to your unfailing love;

according to your great compassion

blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash away all my iniquity

and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I know my transgressions,

and my sin is always before me.

4 Against you, you only, have I sinned

and done what is evil in your sight;

so you are right in your verdict

and justified when you judge.

5 Surely I was sinful at birth,

sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

6 Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;

you taught me wisdom in that secret place.

7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;

wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

8 Let me hear joy and gladness;

let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

9 Hide your face from my sins

and blot out all my iniquity.

10 Create in me a pure heart, O God,

and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

11 Do not cast me from your presence

or take your Holy Spirit from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation

and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

Luke 15:1-7

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.'

3 Then Jesus told them this parable: 4 'Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep." 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.

Introduction to service: I asked if anybody kept bad company?

The PCC and Rugby club where suggested.

I explained that Jesus was criticised for keeping bad company, that he 'sat and ate with sinners', and that in Communion we sit and eat with sinners (relying on God's grace).

What do you know about sheep?

Most of what I know comes from working in rural ministry.

I recall the first service I took in one of my parishes, the Church Warden brought the collection up and said, "I've got to go, I've just been told some of my sheep have got out."

Actually he said 'shapes' not sheep as it was North Yorkshire, "my shapes have got out."

I also recall the time I went to visit a farmer during lambing, his wife said he was down the barns, but when I got there all I could see was sheep, that is until he stood up casting sheep off him as he arose. He had been taking in feed, had tripped under the onrush of bleating sheep, and been completely covered by them.

The noise of a barn full of bleating sheep when the farmer turns up is incredible. Each one of them wants his full attention, and will bleat at the top of their voice to let him know.

I say him, I once met a lady shepherd on a lane, we conversed quietly for a moment or two, then she said she had to get on and call her sheep down from the moor – and she let out a sudden raucous series of yawps sufficient to call down the very moor itself. The sheep came streaming off the moor and across the fields, grubby white and woolly they knew her voice and answered her command.

Most shepherds I know tell me sheep are particularly stupid, and will get into all sorts of trouble and scrapes, one told me she thought sheep were 'suicidally stupid'. I came across one once that was half in a beck, her back end had become water logged and too heavy for her to haul out, it was a Swaledale so I heaved her out by her horns, quickly realising I had to heave her a bit further as she was heading back to the water.

So understand, when the bible compares us to sheep – it's not a flattering comparison.

"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?"

I once heard an old Methodist Lay preacher who was a hill farmer speak on this passage, “go after one sheep and leave t'others in open country?” he said, “By, you can tell that Jesus were a carpenter! What shepherd leaves ninety nine sheep at risk to go after one daft 'un that's wondered off?”

His sermon made me think a bit more carefully about this passage, perhaps all is not quite what it at first seems here.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep is told in response to the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law criticising Jesus for his choice of company, “This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.”

Note, if you are a disciple of Jesus you should be welcoming sinners, and eating with them. The standard response of religious people to sinners is to condemn and reject them, but that's not how Christians are to be, we should follow Jesus' example. The company we keep should cause religious people to question our faith.

It is in response to the Pharisees' and Teachers of the Law's criticism that Jesus tells the Parable of the Lost Sheep. The humour of the story, a shepherd so worried about his one lost sheep that he goes after it and leaves the ninety nine, should open our eyes to the meaning. Jesus is the good shepherd who is foolish enough - foolish enough with compassion, to go after the lost sheep, and foolish enough to call his friends and neighbours to come join him in celebration of the recovery of this single sheep, Jesus who is foolish enough to be seen as irreligious by the religious authorities.

You fool for going after one sheep, you fool for expecting your neighbours to rejoice with you over finding a silly lost sheep, you fool for welcoming sinners, and eating with them!

Christian, are you prepared to be seen as a fool?

1 Corinthians 1:25 says, “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.”

The Parable concludes,

“...there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.”

Now here our ears should twitch like sheep who have heard their shepherd calling us down from the moor, who is not in need of repentance?

Romans 3:23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

The consistent message of Jesus in the gospels is that we all need to turn stop straying and follow the way of God. If you think you are one of the ninety-nine righteous sheep in no need of salvation then you are more lost than the silly sheep who knows she has gone astray and is bleating for the shepherd to come find her.

The Good Shepherd came down to find the lost sheep of this world, to seek out those who know they need God's grace, and to take them home.

The Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law would have heard Jesus speak of the ninety nine righteous who have no need to repent and thought, "does he mean us?" Their knowledge of the Old Testament should have told them the same message of repentance that Jesus taught, remember in Psalm 51 we heard,

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me."

The message of the bible, Old Testament and New, is that we all need to receive God's healing and forgiveness.

Isaiah 53:6, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way."

I said when the bible compares us to sheep – it's not a flattering comparison, sheep are stupid, but God our shepherd is even more foolish than us.

Here's that quote on God's foolishness from 1 Corinthians in context,

“Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”

Jesus is the foolish shepherd who loved his sheep so much that he was willing to go even to the cross to call them back. So welcome sinners, and eat with them, be prepared to be seen as a fool for Christ, and when you hear his voice, run with the flock and follow his way.

Amen.