

Salisbury Cathedral 26th February 2023

Evensong 430pm

Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 16-end

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah. You must diligently keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and his decrees, and his statutes that he has commanded you. Do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may go in and occupy the good land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give you, thrusting out all your enemies from before you, as the LORD has promised.

When your children ask you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your children, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The LORD displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.'

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

Across the country and beyond this month has been marked as LGBT+ History Month. Schools, employers, organisations, and charities have used these weeks to make visible the long and sometimes very difficult journey towards inclusion and acceptance of diversity and equality for all, regardless of sexual orientation or gender. It comes at a turning point for the Church of England (after a long process of reflection) following the recent Synod agreement to authorise prayers of blessing for same-sex couples. The landscape has changed – lost, silenced and marginalised voices and lives are being heard and cherished.

This is the context within which we break open these two pieces of Scripture.

In a recent visit to Chicago a banner caught my eye – designed to attract attention and draw people into the University Church. On that banner were the following words

Never place a period where God has placed a comma, God is still speaking, (Gracie Allen). It is against this articulation of the agency and providence of God as one who is constantly revealing, guiding, and disclosing truth that we read the word of God and seek by grace to be faithful disciples.

The readings are about faithfulness in relationship: God's faithfulness to Israel, freeing them from slavery and oppression in Egypt and giving them ongoing freedom to live in relationship of justice and love with him and with one another. The Law is a gift of God to enable this life of right relationship.

Jesus emphasizes this relational dimension of the Law in his story of the pharisee and the tax-collector. The pharisee misunderstands the purpose and

meaning of religion, which is to live in right relationship with God and neighbour, much more than simply keeping the rules.

Jesus offers these memorable stories of divine mercy, of the unbounded joy God when the lost are found. The stories are not without their subversive word of judgement to the grumblers. They are good news. What do these two stories and of the lost sheep, and the lost coin depict for us? The first and most obvious element common to both parables is the compassionate concern of a searching God. There is no full stop, no end to the reaching out and recovering. Neither the Shepherd nor the woman has a moment's hesitation as to what to do; neither forsakes the search until the sheep and coin is found. We should remember how Jesus in his story telling often subverts who we think its about. Who is the subject and who is the object ?

God is like that – meticulously pursuing confused and rebellious creatures. Such searching gives value to those being sought. They become treasured and significant because they are not left for lost, but are made to the objects of divine concern.

The second striking image is that of heavens delight in the recovery of the lost. The expense of the entertainment to celebrate this may have been more than the value of either the sheep or the coin, but that possibility only adds to the extravagance and joy of the occasion. It is an unusual picture of God – throwing a celestial party, which the Angels dare not miss. It may be an arresting depiction of God. This is an image of a merciful and joyful God that completely overshadows any interest in the behaviour or remorse of the lost creatures.

It offers good news to those who feel themselves unredeemably lost and who can delight in a God who patiently searches, not only for them, but also for others like them. It subverts and disorientates however those offended by the

remarkable generosity of God. Extravagance marks this crafted story and we might do well to model it – to listen to the unheard, the overlooked, the silenced and celebrate different human stories of life and love, of hope and change.

Just and loving relationships are at the heart of religion, and the parables Jesus offers illustrate that God's Kingdom is full of mercy, compassion and generosity as God always reaches out to keep us connected in love with Him and with one another. In contrast to God's Kingdom, judgementalism of any kind - religious or ideological - separates. It is compassion, repentance and generosity that keep relationship alive.

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Even if the CofE doesn't get all the punctuation of Christian believing right, and is a very slow writer sometimes, it is not a church which always places a full stop: sometimes we get the comma on the right place: in recognizing marriage after divorce, embracing the ordination of both women and men, and most recently offering prayers of blessing for same sex unions. Here in the punctuation we move and grow and change.

We are not the most beautiful or swift calligraphers of the Jesus story, but we are beginning to learn how to write.

James Woodward

