

Purists grumble in today's Gospel reading, as the Pharisees complain about Jesus socialising with "sinners". If "this fellow" were really a prophet, if he were really the messiah, if he were really the Son of God, what was he doing mixing with such people? In reply, Jesus tells two parables, each echoing that same wonderful chorus: "Come and rejoice! What was lost is found!" Both stories, however, challenge our received wisdom. If you were a shepherd, would you really leave 99 sheep at the mercy of wolves and weather, and dash off into the wilderness to look for one silly stray? If you lost a coin, would you go to such extravagant lengths as that woman, calling friends together to celebrate finding it? But that, of course, is the point of a parable. Jesus told stories to make people think, make them question their assumptions. And, most importantly, to tell us something about the nature of God and God's dealings with us. To God, every sheep is important, however silly, whatever scrapes they get themselves into. Every single human being is loved by God, however far they may have wandered from the path, and God will go to any lengths to rescue us.

We might not like to think of ourselves as sheep (silly creatures with no mind of their own). We might not even like to think of ourselves as sinners (they're the yobs, the rapists, the dictators). But the story is aimed at all those who, like the Pharisees, think themselves above reproach: at all those who cultivate a them-and-us attitude, and put other people into the "sinner" category because they're different, because they don't match up to our standards, because they're of another race, creed, "class", sexuality or gender.

Of these two parables, the story of the lost sheep gives us the traditional picture of God as a shepherd, familiar to the first listeners from Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, and one of the many male images of God. Only Luke, with his interest in women's faith, records the parable of the lost coin from the thread around her head. The women around Jesus would surely have treasured up this story and passed it down: a story that wonderfully includes a story from the household. They would not think the woman mercenary or foolish. Had she not been saving for years for her daughter's wedding? What joy she would feel on finding that coin!

God has been saving for years, too. God has been saving since the beginning of creation, loving us extravagantly, forgiving us unconditionally, and patiently waiting. God saved the chosen people from slavery in Egypt and, as we recall in this Mass, God saves all people from sin and death, through the cross. We are all sinners but, in Jesus, God's love reaches out to us, searching for us until we're found. We only need to repent, which simply means to recognise that we're lost and to listen for the voice that's calling us (in prayer, Bible study, and worship and everyday life) to a joyful reunion.

Speaking of joyful reunions, A RC friend of mine, reminded me of a prayer to St Antony of Padua – the Patron Saint of lost items. "Tony, Tony turned around, something's lost that must be found. Amen."

So may you all be blessed in all you do and find whatever, old or new, this coming week.

Amen