

24th Sunday of OT 2019
Fr Jonathan Jong

Exodus 32.7-11, 13-14

1 Timothy 1.12-17

Luke 15.1-10

These must be the most reassuring passages in all of Scripture. To think, that we—even we—are the recipients of this mercy: we who have doubtless corrupted ourselves, have turned aside quickly out of the way commanded us; have, instead of renouncing all things, made for ourselves golden calves of security and comfort and wealth and power. Even for us, does the grace of our Lord flow: even for us, who are constantly blaspheming against him, persecuting and insulting him in our snobbery and casual cruelty toward the Christ in the homeless on our streets, the Christ in the working poor struggling to make ends meet, the Christ in the lonely and sad and sick and dying of their sickness and sadness and loneliness. We must be the foremost of sinners, fiddling as the planet burns, and as our wraths do too, burn hot with resentments and enmities, old and new. And yet,

Christ remains patient, in whom is love for us and even faith.

There can be no miracle greater than this. If we think it remarkable that we could have faith in God given the state of things, we are kidding ourselves. The remarkable thing is that God has faith in us, has faith for us, has faithfulness enough for us all, to keep at it still, to keep this whole thing going despite the mess we have made of it. The miracle is that God has not given up, given us up to ourselves and our destructiveness that turns out to be self-destructiveness after all, after all the dust is settled that we have kicked up in our frantic rush to the land we have promised ourselves, and advertisers too not to mention politicians, but that turns out to be nowhere at all, where ultimately nothing lies, where our clamourings to get ahead come to nothing after all.

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St Luke has missed a rhetorical trick here, in the way he arranges his three most famous parables: of the lost

sheep and the lost coin in today's reading, and of the prodigal son, which follows.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the father loses one of his two sons: 50% of his male offspring, a human life of incalculable worth. And when the son returns, the father rejoices: he forgives the son's insolence and extravagance, repaying them with yet more extravagance. He is kinder about it than we might have been in his shoes, but his joy is totally relatable. His son who was written off as dead is now alive after all. This was indeed cause to celebrate.

In the parable of the lost coin, the woman loses 10% of her savings, worth about a day's wages. It is certainly worth vacuuming the flat for. And when she finds the coin under the *chaise longue*, she invites her friends over: shared joy is doubled, and all that. This too is relatable: if I thought I'd lost a day's pay, I'd rummage around for it, and if found it again, the first round at the pub after mass would be on me.

And finally, in the parable of the lost sheep, a single creature has gone missing, 1% of the man's stock, who

must have been wealthy because anyone who owned a hundred sheep in those days before commercial farming would have been pretty rich. And yet, for 1%, the man abandons his flock in the wilderness to find it, probably stuck in some grubby hole somewhere, from which he would have had to yank the thing and carry it home on his shoulders. Now, this just seems crazy to me.

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it?

Not me. But God would, which is the point of the story, a point better made had *this* parable come last. God rejoices at the return of his son: fine, so would most of us, who are biologically programmed to love our children even when they are being horrible and thick. God sweeps the house to find a silver coin: fine, so would most of us, to recoup 10% of our savings. God abandons a whole bunch of sheep to roam the hill country to look for *one* of them: now, that's extra, that's above and beyond economic rationality, as the

cost of putting the flock at risk far outweighs the benefit of having Dolly back in the fold.

St Luke's problem, I think, is that he misunderstands at least the parables of the lost coin and lost sheep. He gets the order mixed up because he thinks these are stories about repentance and God's response to it. This is why he ends each of them the way he does. So, he tries to make them into preludes to the parable of the prodigal son, in which the father's response clearly is at centre stage: to the chagrin of his other, slightly uptight son, he welcomes the irresponsible brat with a robe and ring and shoes and music and dancing and even a fatted calf.

But this will not do, not least because no one actually repents in any of these stories: not the coin, for obvious reasons, nor the sheep, nor even the prodigal son, who is not so much sorry for what he has done than sorry for himself, the state in which he finds himself. But it will not do also because the parable of the prodigal son is the odd one out in this set. The father rejoices lavishly at his son's return, but we are not told anything about what he did to find him while he was

gone. As far as we can tell, he does nothing but stare out the window waiting. In stark contrast, we are told that the woman lights a lamp and sweeps the house and that the man heads out into the wilderness and carries the lost sheep home. These two are stories about God's initiative: the sheep was not written off as dead, he brought it back alive; the coin was not left for lost, she sought it and found it.

In omitting the parable of the prodigal son, the lectionary wrenches these two stories out of their literary context, but in doing so, it helps us to see what Luke obscures: that God's patience with us does not consist in waiting aloof and above the fraying of our moral fibres, God's forgiveness is not a response to our knitting ourselves back together. The miracle of the thing is that God seeks us out, ransacks the house for us, combs the hills for us, before we can pick ourselves up out of there, hungry heads hung low and apologies rehearsed.

The miracle of the thing is that God is here even now, two thousand years of failure later, two thousand years of squandering the gospel, of hiding the silver

that we were called to give away with reckless abandon, of getting stuck in ditches of our own digging to keep others out or ourselves in. God is here even now, not only to receive us and eat with us, but to be our food, to dwell within us, as if we could ever be worthy of such a thing, which of course we can be, because God has made it so.

It is too easy to despair at ourselves, the state of our corruption, the corruption of our state. It is too easy to throw our hands up, to chalk up our failings to our brokenness, the cracks of our personalities and our human personhood. But down this path lies cynicism and fatalism. It is, in any case, the road not taken by God, whose response to the mess we have made is to get all in, to wash us and feed us, and send us off again to live anew, every day a new day, every choice new, every encounter with a stranger or one estranged new, each act of repentance we can muster, cause for the angels to break out the champagne. We know what to do, then: take, eat, drink, go, love, serve. And maybe stop to hear corks popping somewhere: I bet they like the sound of that almost as much as we do.