

Lost Sheep (Matthew 18:10-14)

What key principles of being church do we need to hold onto in this period of change? Why does Jesus talk about the angels of 'the little ones' in heaven? Does the parable of 'the Lost Sheep' in Matthew have the same application as the one in Luke's gospel?

Changing Church

2020 has seen probably the biggest changes to the way we engage with church in a lifetime. Of course we hope that many of these changes will not be permanent, whilst others we hope may well continue beyond the present crisis and no doubt the church will come out of all this different in some way.

But as we make changes to church life for whatever reason it is perhaps more important than ever that we are clear about the fundamentals of what our church life is all about.

In Matthew 18 Jesus is teaching his disciples how they are to relate to other disciples. How they are to live in Christian community.

As we saw last week, the teaching stems from a question about who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus challenges this desire to be greater than others as a big danger for the life of the church and its members.

Now he moves on to emphasise that every disciple matters to God and so every disciple should matter to every other disciple.

Two Pictures: One Point - Every Disciple Matters to God

Jesus makes the point using two powerful pictures, which help us to see how God sees the 'little ones', Jesus word to describe disciples, those who come humbly to God like little children.

Their Angels in Heaven

The first picture Jesus gives us is a glimpse into the throne room of heaven. There he says the angels that represent each individual disciple are in God's presence and see God's face.

When I was at university, I knew someone whose dad was a cabinet minister at the time. His dad, would have regularly sat in the cabinet room at 10 Downing Street with Margaret Thatcher. He was only one step away from personally influencing the most powerful person in the country.

What Jesus says here about every disciple is infinitely more impressive than that!! Why? Not only are the angels more closely connected with their individual disciple, but this is God's throne room - God is infinitely more powerful and vastly more awesome than any Prime Minister, President, King or Queen.

And actually we can easily miss an important fact in this picture.

When Isaiah had his great vision of God in the temple. In the vision were amazing angels - seraphim flying around God Himself. They called out:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD God Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory!"

And the sound of their voices made the whole building shake!

But, there is another key fact about these Seraphim: they covered their faces with two of their wings. Great, mighty and awesome as these seraphim were, they did not dare to look on the face of God!!

But what does Jesus say about the angels of 'the little ones'?

They always see the face of my Father in Heaven!!

In other words the angels of the little ones of every individual disciple and especially every insignificant seeming disciple of Christ have an access to God that is of the highest rank for angels!!

That is how much every disciple matters to God.

The Lost Sheep

The second picture that Jesus gives is the more familiar story of the Lost Sheep.

Comparison with other Lost Sheep Parable

Now, we need to be careful here. This Parable or story of Jesus appears twice in the Gospels. Once in Matthew and once in Luke. We must be careful not to assume they are both making the same point.

There are big similarities between the stories:

Both involve a certain man and 100 sheep. 1 sheep is lost and then found by his owner who rejoices when he finds him.

The basic story is the same, but there are some important differences between Luke's version and Matthew's version suggesting a slightly different point is being made by each.

In Luke Jesus is addressing the Pharisees, who are criticising him for hanging out with sinners.

In Matthew Jesus is addressing the disciples in a block of teaching about how to relate to other disciples.

In Luke, therefore, the context shows the sheep represents 'the lost', 'the sinners,' those outside the community of faith, being brought in by God. It is Jesus's way of justifying his evangelism of sinners. As Jesus says elsewhere in Luke:

"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." (Luke 19:10)

In Matthew, however, the context shows the sheep represents a disciple who is in the process of wandering off from the Christian community and faith in God.

In Luke the Parable is about evangelism, in Matthew it is about Pastoral Care. Both are about people mattering to God, even though they might not seem to matter to others!

Every Disciple Matters

And in the story Jesus tells, the sheep that wanders off becomes the total focus and energy of his owner. He is the one that matters more than all other 99 sheep, that are still safely in the flock on the mountain.

Why? Because he is worried about this sheep being permanently lost. For the shepherd, each sheep matters as a financial asset, to lose one would be serious. One that wanders off becomes an easy prey to wolves and if that happens, then the sheep is lost forever.

So, the shepherd forgets about the other 99 and throws everything into finding the one and Jesus says, when he finds that one, he is happier about having that one, than about the other ninety-nine. The one is immensely valuable to the Shepherd.

Jesus makes the point of the story abundantly clear in verse 14: God does not want to lose any of the little ones. He does not want them to wander away from faith in him, from salvation. He does not want them to perish.

And Jesus tells the disciples this, because he wants them to have the same attitude. If every disciple matters to their Father in Heaven, no matter how insignificant, confused or misled, they should matter to them as well. If God does not want any of them to perish, we too should be about helping every disciple to remain in the faith.

Now next week we will see that sadly, people do get to a point where they have rejected the church so much that we have to treat them as permanently lost. And I can think of many people that have been lost to the Christian church over the years. Every time that happens it is a tragedy in God's eyes and it should be in ours as well.

We need to work to make the church a place that values every disciple and is determined to do all it can to help those who are wandering off re-discover their place in the life of the church.

I don't mean that we should become like a sect bullying or controlling people to make sure they don't leave. That is not the way of Christ or the church.

Rather we need to become a church where every disciple of Christ is valued by every other disciple of Christ?

Three Ways to Respond:

Briefly I want to suggest three ways to respond. Three activities that should be the foundation of church life and remain so whatever changes covid-19 or anyone else forces on us.

Prayer

Firstly, if we are concerned and value our fellow disciples, we will want to pray for people! We saw that every disciple's angel sits in the heavenly courtroom.

Did you know your prayers also go into the heavenly courtroom?

In Revelation 8, part of the vision involves incense being burned on the golden altar in front of the throne of God. These represent the prayers of God's people. The point is that every prayer comes before the face of God - he sees our requests, he reads our emails / letters! We matter to God and our prayers matter to God.

So, if we are concerned about our fellow disciples then we will want to pray for them! So, that our concern is added to God's concern.

So who do you pray for?

As a vicar I aim to pray for every church member at least once a week - that's a list of around 200 names! But, then I am called to be the vicar at St. Luke's.

You probably cannot pray for 200 names each week, but could you pray for 20? Why not make a list of other Christians you know at church - perhaps especially the ones who have less friends at church and pray for them. You may not have seen them for 6 months or be able to see them at present, but you can still let God know that they matter to you by praying for them.

Care

Secondly, we need to care. To help keep people connected with the community of the church. After all part of the problem for the sheep in the story is that it had wandered off from the rest of the flock. One of the biggest dangers for disciples of Christ is that they wander off from any connection with other Christian brothers and sisters.

How do we stop that happening? First of all as it says in verse 10, we need to ensure that we are not despising or looking down on those members of our community that you might see as less important in some way.

Paul warns the church in Corinth about their services, where the wealthy were being well catered for, but the poor were being ignored:

"Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you **despise** the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!" (1 Corinthians 11:22)

If people feel looked down on or valued less than an 'in-crowd' then they may easily feel pushed away and wander off. Let's work hard to make sure that does not happen.

More positively we also need to be pro-active in ensuring everyone feels a valued member of the community.

That is why at the start of lockdown we set up a phone network and we've kept up wishing people happy birthdays. That's why we've also tried to make sure everyone has access to the service by using YouTube or sending out DVDs to those who cannot access YouTube and having regular emails or sending out letters those who do not access email!

But, as we move forward into a new phase of the present situation and as we look to the future we need to ask ourselves, how do we ensure that we show care to every disciple in our community and make sure we keep them well connected, so that they do not wander off?

Share - God's Truth

Finally, if we value every disciple as mattering to God, then we will want to share God's truth with them.

Jesus uses the Greek word for 'wander' again later in Matthew's gospel. In, chapter 22, he tells the Sadducees that they are rejecting the idea of life after death, because they have wandered from a correct understanding of scripture.

Then in chapter 24 he warns his disciples about false Christ's whose false teaching might cause them to wander from the truth.

To stop someone wandering away from Christ involves helping them properly understand the Word of God.

So, how have we been sharing God's truth during lockdown?

Well we've worked hard at continuing to make our services and sermons available to all and hopefully accessible to all ages at some level by putting them on YouTube. We've also been running a couple of Bible Study groups on Zoom each week.

As we continue through these uncertain times, we need to keep being creative about thinking about how we can share God's word with others so that they may know the truth that brings hope and transforms us into the people God calls us to be.

Loved by God?

As Christians, at communion and in many of the songs that we sing, we celebrate and rejoice in the fact that God loves us. Jesus died on the cross for me, that I could be rescued from my sin and death and become a child of God. It is wonderful and amazing to know how much God loves me!

But I must not forget, that God also loves every disciple - even those who seem unimportant or insignificant to me. And if God loved them deeply enough to send Jesus to die on the cross for them, then surely they should matter deeply to me as a disciple of Christ too.

Every disciple matters deeply to God. They should also matter to me and to you!