



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The 13th Sunday after Trinity Proper 19 Year C

**1 Timothy 1.12-17**

**Luke 15.1-10**

A while ago we looked at the account of a meal Jesus shared at the house of a leader of the Pharisees. They were all 'watching him carefully' we are told. I'll bet they were, waiting for him to break a rule, to trap him somehow. Well he certainly gave them something to think about when he cured the man with palsy, Sabbath or no. The life of a human being is more precious to God than man made rules!

Now we have the Pharisees once more, once more there is the mention of other meals but this time they have found something else to moan about.

<sup>15.1</sup> 'Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

They might have been grumbling but they weren't doing it very quietly because Jesus hears them and, as so often, their comments provoke parables; the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin. There is urgency here. Anyone who has lost something precious to them has felt that urgency. I remember losing a lovely little wooden holding cross from Lindisfarne; it meant the world to me. I searched everywhere with no result. I was really upset because it was so dear to me. 'Never mind' said mum, 'Debbie will find it.' Our cleaner had an amazing ability to do just that. After an appeal from me she came downstairs with the cross in the palm of her hand. My rejoicing was clear and she was duly rewarded. Another way of thinking of it is the dismay when you lose your diary; everything grinds to a halt till it is found.

Let's look at the woman who loses the coin.

<sup>8</sup> '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?

We will never know what sort of coin Jesus was referring to. I remember vividly when 'The bible comes to life' exhibition visited Tamworth. It was held in St. Editha's church. It came twice but the first time I was part of it.

Parts of the bible were explained and costumes were worn and exhibits shown. I will never forget the magnificent account of 'The Shepherd's Psalm' psalm 23. On one evening I was a bride, wearing a typical costume and one of the others had a headband around their forehead on which were threaded small coins. The person narrating explained the costumes and was talking about this passage explaining that the coins would be very precious to the woman who wore them. Maybe it was a coin from a bridal headband that was the coin Jesus is referring to. Maybe it was a part of her savings. It was of no more value than the others, what made it precious was that it was lost. That is why she is searching.

<sup>9</sup> '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.'

It isn't just that when she finds it she breathes a sigh of relief and puts it back on her headband. No she calls everybody in, telling them to join in with her rejoicing. She has a get together, the sheer joy is tangible, she wants everyone to join in and feel that joy too.

I don't suppose the first parable is quite so personal to us. Not many of us keep sheep but to Jesus' audience it was easily understandable.

<sup>4</sup> '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?

Some of these men would be shepherds and farmers. If they were hired shepherds and the sheep belonged to someone else the loss of an animal would be catastrophic. The urgency was such that he was prepared to leave the others on the hillside while he searched earnestly for the lost sheep. When it was found it would be taken back to the safety of the flock. The shepherd would indeed rejoice. Just look at this tender image.

<sup>5</sup> 'When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.'

In some of the earliest depictions of Jesus he is shown doing just this, as 'the good shepherd.' He is the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, for everyone of us. Think now of psalm 23, 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,' it goes on to explain how the good shepherd cares for his sheep. This is what God does for his people whom he loves, as a shepherd cared for each one of his sheep whom he knew individually. It ends in the same way as did the story of the lost coin.

<sup>6</sup> '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"

He is unable to contain his joy but runs and not only tells everyone but asks them to join in his rejoicing. So Jesus comes to the meaning of the parable,

<sup>7</sup> '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.

and

<sup>10</sup> 'Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

Let's go back to the beginning. The self-righteous Pharisees consider they have booked their seats in heaven. They are alright thank you very much. But why on earth is Jesus eating with sinners? They are outcasts, beyond the pale. The grumbling of the scribes and Pharisees shows how Jesus is roundly condemned for this. We don't know who the people were who are referred to as sinners, often it is 'tax gatherers and sinners'. Tax collectors were often corrupt; they were collecting taxes for the hated Romans and often were swindling people. But with Jesus everything can change. Think of the story of the tax collector Levi (Matthew) in Luke 5.

<sup>27</sup> After this he went out and saw a tax-collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' <sup>28</sup> And he got up, left everything, and followed him. <sup>29</sup> 'Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax-collectors and others sitting at the table with them. <sup>30</sup> The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with tax-collectors and sinners?' <sup>31</sup> Jesus answered, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick;'

This is a similar story. The tax collector is in the wrong, he is a cheat but notice it is Jesus who calls him. Jesus sees the potential in him. Matthew gives it all up and, like the fishermen, follows Jesus. He turns from his former ways to adopt the way of Jesus. Not only that, he is so delighted about his calling he gives a banquet for all his friends and the principal guest is Jesus, the one who has turned his life around, who has saved him. It is a cause for a party.

Once again the Pharisees complain and Jesus' answer is similar to our passage. The point is Matthew has changed and goes on to be a disciple of Jesus.

The point is Jesus has gone to these 'sinners' because they, like Matthew, need to change their ways. They have gone wrong somehow and Jesus is calling for repentance from them. He is teaching them of the way of God, telling them of his good news. How is anyone to repent if they are never given the chance or taught a better way, just ostracised and ignored by the so called 'better' class of people? Of course Jesus goes to those who need to turn their life around, who need to see the light. So often in the gospel it is people like this who turn to Jesus and who follow him. It is really heavily ironic I think when Jesus says,

'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.'

I am fairly sure that Jesus raises an eyebrow when he says this because the Pharisees think they are righteous. They are legal experts who keep to the letter of the law but actually are far from God. The Pharisees certainly do not turn to him; do not follow him or accept him as Messiah.

Jesus says he is sent first to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' but look at how he heals the daughter of the Canaanite woman because of her faith. The Gentiles are not outcasts, Jesus tells his disciples to 'baptise all nations.' Paul becomes the 'apostle to the Gentiles', he is at pains to show them that they are by no means second class citizens, all are one in Christ. There is neither 'Jew nor Gentile, slave or free,' there is no superior race or class, Jesus comes to all. The point about the people in the parables here is that they are 'lost' and Jesus goes to search for them, to bring them into his fold.

Look at St. Paul himself, he was a Pharisee, he obeyed the law in every detail but he persecuted the church. Jesus pulls him up short on the Damascus Road. Jesus calls him and his life is never the same again, he becomes the greatest Christian missionary of all time. If we think of John 3.16 'God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.'

Jesus is offering people the chance to turn to him and live in his way. He brought the good news from God. It is a challenge, will you accept it? It is a call to repentance, to adopt a whole new lifestyle. Humanity was far from God, the relationship ruptured and broken. Jesus came and by his death and resurrection he won salvation for us and renewed the relationship with the God who loves us. As with Matthew, Jesus calls us in love. But a covenant is a two way thing; we have to turn to Jesus, to live according to his ways. God loves every one of us; there is no status in the eyes of God, but people can reject him or turn to him. Tragically the majority of the Jews rejected Jesus. But

all who turn to him are metaphorically, part of the heavenly banquet and that is a cause for rejoicing!

So we come to the letter to Timothy. Last week we looked at Philemon, a letter written to an individual. That, together with Timothy and Titus, are the only ones we have of Paul's written to one person. These two are known as the 'Pastoral Letters.' Not only is Paul their pastor, he is instructing them in their pastoral ministry. They were written to give instruction and encouragement to these fellow missionaries. There is some discussion as to whether these letters were written by Paul but for this Reflection I will refer to him as the writer.

<sup>1</sup> 'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Saviour and of Christ Jesus our hope, <sup>2</sup> To Timothy, my loyal child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord'.

Paul begins the letter with the traditional greeting; note that he calls Timothy 'my loyal child in the faith', it is reminiscent of Paul referring to himself as 'father' to the runaway slave Onesimus. It does not have the warmth that Paul shows however when he calls him 'my heart'. We know where Timothy is, that is made clear at the opening as Paul instructs Timothy,

<sup>3</sup> 'I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, <sup>4</sup>and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith.'

Obviously all is not well in the early Christian church in Ephesus. So often it is easy to drift from the truth, the 'different doctrines' referred to here. There were arguments and teaching which was false or associated with Judaism and the law. All has changed now, Jesus the Messiah has come, he has fulfilled the law. The old law, the Temple worship all that is over. Laws, based on the code of the Ten Commandments are the clear guide to moral behaviour. It is Jesus Christ who is all in all. With Jesus God had entered our world, nothing would be the same again. Therefore the teaching must conform to the teaching of Jesus that is,

'the divine training that is known by faith. <sup>5</sup>But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith.

and

'conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.'

That gospel message must not be diluted or confused. It is vital that Timothy and all Christian teachers who pass on the message of Jesus understand what they are doing and understand Christ's teaching.

So we come to our passage for today, we have looked at the gospel where Jesus eats with sinners, teaches them and invites them to change their lives, give up their sinful way and follow his teaching. This passage from Timothy fits so well with that because Paul is saying, that he was the greatest sinner but Christ called him. The word of God is for everyone,

<sup>12</sup> 'I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, <sup>13</sup>even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, <sup>14</sup>and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.'

That day on the Damascus Road changed Paul's life forever. The way this is expressed is quite beautiful, 'the grace of the Lord overflowed' for Paul and enveloped him in his saving healing love. No human being could have envisaged a chief persecutor being transformed like this. Paul recognises the mercy of divine intervention which saved him.

Those who know the 1662 service which we follow at Spital Chapel will recognise what Paul says next as part of the section called 'The comfortable words.'

<sup>15</sup> 'The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.'

Here is the clear link to the gospel passage. The word of God is for everyone and Jesus came so that sinners might repent and turn to God. His good news transforms lives and transforms the world. Indeed in a few short years his gospel had spread from the apostles across the known world.

Paul was a chief persecutor because he says he didn't realise what he was doing. His zeal was for Judaism, seeing Christianity as a threat. He didn't realise that Jesus was actually the promised Messiah who brought in the new way of God. That Jesus was the fulfilment of the scriptures. So in his ignorance he was trying to destroy Christians yet God saved him and appointed to him the position of 'apostle to the Gentiles.' The point Paul is making is that if he, a chief of sinners, can be redeemed and used by God, no one is beyond God's love. The message of Christ is, repent, turn to me in love and live out my gospel in your lives. That is indeed what Paul says too. Often we feel inadequate; I am not good enough to do that. Well who is? Paul wasn't yet look what God did with his life.

<sup>16</sup> 'But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.'

Paul says Jesus acted in that way to show others that nobody is beyond God's love and all are invited into his church. This is all done through the power of Jesus and the grace of God. Paul ends with praise to him.

<sup>17</sup>*To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

~~~~~