

# Meditations on the Parables of Mercy – 1



The one sheep who strayed, the ninety-nine others and the shepherd's attitude and actions

**N**ow the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to Jesus, and the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them!'

*So he told them this parable: 'What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he 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? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost. 'Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.'*

Luke 15:1-7

## Way In... Initial Reflections

(5 minutes)

### Receiving Sinners and Eating with Them

The two actions of Jesus about which the Pharisees and scribes complained and grumbled are 'Receiving Sinners' and 'Eating with them'. Jewish custom was the opposite; to shun sinners and pronounce them not fit to share a meal with.

Perhaps the attitude which prompts such habitual rejection starts with the sense that sin is a contamination which can spread, or an offence whose response and resolution simply requires punishment. Likewise my personal attitudes of condemnation may include a fear that by spending time with sinners I might become more contaminated myself. By eating with them I might by association be seen as a sinner.

## Perspectives on Sin in Hebrew and Greek

### (The languages of Scripture)

The Hebrew language of the scriptures of the Jewish people has a number of different words for 'sin'. We could translate these words as 'Miss the mark', 'Have done wrong' (Having distorted from the straightness of moral life), have 'acted wickedly', having 'rebelled', having 'turned aside'. The most common word for sin in the Greek language of the New Testament has as its root 'missing the mark', as if an archer aimed at the correct target but lacked the skill or experience to hit it.

Aren't these reasonable? Isn't spending time with 'sinners' often equivalent to being in an 'occasion of sin', and isn't it true that eating with someone makes you their 'companion' (a word which derives from the act of sharing bread with another)

...And yet Jesus' starting point is different. It is found in the 'yearning for returning' which is mercy. Compassion directs his actions which enable those who stray to be carried home on his shoulders. Can I be filled too with this 'yearning for returning?' Can I be filled with a sense that when one soul is missing, all others suffer from being incomplete?

Jesus in this parable uses none of the standard images of sin. Instead he simply compares those who sin to sheep who stray...

## Digging Deeper

(15 min)

### Straying and Returning

Sheep have a natural instinct to look for food and to eat. This is what keeps them alive, what helps them put on weight, helps to make them fruitful so they can conceive, nurture and feed the season's lambs.

It is not, however, always a beneficial instinct. Sometimes it leads them astray. The instinct can lack wisdom and can be unaware of danger. They can be attracted through open gates to unknown territory. They can eat too much lush new grass or other vegetation which can cause them to bloat;

they can graze on pastures which are infected with parasites which will ruin their health. They may be attracted to areas where there are briars or thorns to entangle and trap them, where there may be predators such as wild dogs to worry or kill them, where there may be natural hazards such as cliffs or fast-flowing rivers which could precipitate injury or death.

In the middle-East where water is scarce wandering off could lead to places of parched land and drought.

In the parable Jesus does something which seems foolhardy. His concern for the one strayed sheep is so great that he gives it all his loving attention. He leaves the others in a fold and actively searches for the wayward one. And when he finds it his heart fills with joy. He, himself

becomes the vehicle, carries close to his heart, brings back to the fold, the stray. His central attitude is not the anger of condemnation but the joy of rescue which he shares with friends and neighbours. The stray has returned!

## Inside-Out

(10 min)

**How does this reflect your daily life?**

What attractions lead you into danger or prompt you to stray?

What type of attraction or greed can lead you out of the community of holiness and the company of the saints?

**Imagine yourself as the sheep**

What does it feel like to be carried by Jesus?

Can you join in the celebration in joy at the return of the sheep who strayed?

What is it like to return to the fold?

## Inside the Text

(10 min)

Re-read the first sentence and ponder...

Ask yourself what the word 'sinner' means to you.

How do you use the word of others?

How do you use the word of yourself?

Does your sin or that of others lead to being shunned?

Or made unwelcome at meals, feasts, or celebrations?

How do you imagine Jesus sees and reacts to your sin?

Ponder the words...

*'The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to Jesus'*

When you sin do you then feel drawn by Jesus to come close to him? Why do you think those in the gospel felt drawn?

## Pray a Psalm

(10 min)

Slowly read through Psalm 22 (23) and ponder what the psalm adds to the overall picture. How do we experience Jesus shepherding me individually and as part of his flock?

*The Lord is my shepherd;  
there is nothing I shall want.*

*Fresh and green are the pastures  
where he gives me repose.*

*Near restful waters he leads me,  
to revive my drooping spirit.*

*He guides me along the right path;  
he is true to his name.*

*If I should walk in the valley  
of darkness*

*no evil would I fear.*

*You are there with your crook  
and your staff;*

*with these you give me comfort.*

*You have prepared a banquet for me  
in the sight of my foes.*

*My head you have anointed with oil;  
my cup is overflowing.*

*Surely goodness and kindness  
shall follow me*

*all the days of my life.*

*In the Lord's own house shall I dwell  
for ever and ever.*



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