

Wednesday Worship

24th June 2020

Opening prayers

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you.

Thank you, Creator God, for summer's warmth
and light, your gift.

All **Help us to find joy in the promise of each day.**

Thank you, Jesus, for summer's peace
and stillness, your gift.

All **Help us to rest in the beauty of each day.**

Thank you, gentle Spirit, for summer's colour
and life, your gift.

All **Help us to thrive in the hope of each day.**

Holy Trinity, dynamic and loving, we thank you
for seasons and cycles.

All **But especially for today in this season of summer.
Amen.**

Introduction

Today we have the fourth in our series of five parables from Matthew's Gospel. This time we hear about the sheep who was lost and then found, with much rejoicing. It can be easy to forget how much God wants to find and love each individual person and this parable reminds us of that.

Hymn: I will sing the wondrous story

Prayers with lighting of a candle

All We believe, O God, that you are
the Creator of all things.

All We believe, O God, that you are
the Lord and giver of life.

All We believe, O God, that you are
the sustainer of all peoples.

All We believe, O God, that you are
the giver of breath and spirit.

All We believe, O God, that you are
the giver of body and mind.

All We believe, O God, that you are
here and with us now.

Ist Reading: Ezekiel 34.1-16

The word of the LORD came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live, says the Lord GOD, because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, I am against the shepherds; and I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep; no longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.

For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Prayer of response

Lord, we thank you that you care so much for us.
Forgive us when we do not care for those entrusted to us,
and gather us all safely into your fold.

All **Amen.**

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;

for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

Prayer of response

Lord, we are living through a time of anxiety and darkness.
Lead us safely through, we pray,
for you are our hope.
Comfort the suffering and the sorrowful,
bind up the broken-hearted,
defend the defenceless,
and pour your blessings upon us.

All **Amen.**

2nd Reading: 1 Peter 2.21-25

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

'He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.'

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Prayer of response

Lord, our great shepherd,
give us grace to follow in your footsteps,
that we might live for righteousness
and know the joy of your healing and forgiveness.

All **Amen.**

3rd Reading: Matthew 18.10-14

'Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

Prayer of response

Lord our God,
it is so easy to dismiss others as unimportant.
Yet you teach us that everyone is important.
Help us to remember this and rejoice in your great care.
All **Amen.**

Hymn: The Lord's my shepherd

Reflection

The Parable of the Lost Sheep begins with a line that I've never taken much notice of before. It goes:

"Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven."

As Christians we don't always remember the awesome holiness of the living God.

But if we look at the Old Testament, we see plenty of evidence of it.

Moses, for example, was told that no-one could look at the face of God and live, and was allowed to look at God's back as a sign of special favour.

Then there's Isaiah's famous vision of God in the Temple in Isaiah 6, where the prophet sees God and expects to die in the face of such holiness.

But then he sees that the angels around God are also covering their faces.

Even angels can't look upon the face of God.

In fact, this is normal in Jewish depictions of the heavenly throne – angels cover their faces in the presence of God.

But the angels who look after the "little ones" don't have to cover their faces.

They are allowed to look at God directly.

This is a sign of how important they are to God, or rather of how important their charges are to God.

This parable comes at the end of a collection of parables focusing on children, and of course they are included in the list of "little ones".

But there are other "little ones" as well, just as weak and vulnerable as a small child.

These are the poor, the sick, the anxious, the depressed and those who live in constant pain.

They are the poor, the unemployed and the homeless.

They include the refugee, the outcast, the person rejected on grounds of race, gender or sexuality, the person we're tempted to look down on or laugh at, and simply all those who don't seem to fit and are not made welcome.

And they include the ones we call sinners, as well as the people lost to addiction, pulled into street gangs at a young age, and the ones we're tempted to write off as hopeless criminals or scroungers.

All of these are God's "little ones", he cares about every one of them, and he doesn't want to lose any of them.

Which makes me wonder: when was the last time you lost something important?

As a Licensed Lay Minister, or Reader, I have to return my bishop's licence every three years and have it reissued.

The last time this happened I couldn't find it.

I was emptying out cupboards and drawers, creating a lot of mess, and worrying about where it could've got to.

Eventually I had to admit defeat and ask for a new one, which was fine, if a bit embarrassing.

Of course, once I had the new one my old one turned up!

We all know what it's like to lose something important to us.

We can get frustrated, anxious, angry or afraid.

We search high and low, get others to help, retrace our steps, look in the most unlikely of places.

And if we're able to find what we'd lost there's a sense of great relief and joy, along with maybe a bit of annoyance at having to spend all that time searching.

And if we have such a range of emotions about losing an item imagine how God feels about losing one of his "little ones".

In fact, we don't have to imagine, because we can see it in the life and death of Jesus.

Jesus came to "seek and save the lost" – this was what we might call his mission statement.

This was what he dedicated his life to, even when the religious leaders grumbled about him hanging out with sinners.

And this was what he died for, and what he rose again to complete.

Like the shepherd in the parable, God comes out searching for the lost, knowing that they're in danger and needing help, and anxious to get them back safely to his fold.

And when a sheep is found there's great rejoicing, for this is not a grudging rescue operation.

So, what does this mean for us, who maybe feel like we're the sheep safely in the fold being good.

Well, I think for one thing times we're all in danger of being that lost sheep, the "little one" in need of help.

Life has a way of throwing the unexpected at us, as we've all experienced in the last few months, and sometimes we struggle and fall and wander off track because of it.

When this happens it's good to remember that our Shepherd is looking for us and will find us if we let him.

And secondly, this story should encourage us to remember that in God's eyes the weakest and most vulnerable in our society are the most important, and the ones who seem lost are not to be written off.

Instead, we are to all be one flock, rejoicing in God's care and loving each one that he brings to us.

Intercessions

Upon the leaders of the Church,
that they may be good shepherds,
and upon all your people
that we may be one flock
and so that your lost ones may be found,

All **Lord, come in hope.**

Upon the leaders of nations and peoples,
that they may hear your voice and follow you,
and so that the oppressed and marginalised
may find a voice
and take their rightful place in society,

All **Lord, come in hope.**

Upon our homes and communities,
especially those who are shielding, isolated,
lonely, frustrated or afraid,

All **Lord, come in hope.**

Upon those whose livelihoods are threatened,
those who have lost jobs or businesses,
and those who are uncertain about the future,

All **Lord, come in hope.**

Upon those who are ill or afraid of Covid-19,
upon those who care for the sick and the dying,
at home or in hospitals, hospices and care homes,
and upon those who are weary and grieving,

All **Lord, come in hope.**

Upon those walking in the shadow of death,
and upon those who have gone before us,
that we may gathered together in your kingdom,

All **Lord, come in hope.**

Great Shepherd of us all,
**hear our prayer,
and make us one in heart and mind
to serve you with joy for ever.
Amen.**

All

Gathering our prayers and praises into one,
let us pray with confidence as our Saviour has taught us.

All **Our Father, which art in heaven...**

Hymn: Amazing grace

Closing prayers

Great God, you are one God,
and you bring together what is scattered
and seek out those who are lost.
Unite us with the scattered peoples of the earth
that we may be one family of your children.
bind up all our wounds
and heal us in spirit,
that we may be renewed as disciples of Jesus Christ,
our Shepherd, Lord and Saviour.

All Amen.

May God
who clothes the lilies and feeds the birds of the sky,
who leads the lambs to pasture and the deer to water,
who multiplied loaves and fishes and changed water into wine,
lead us, feed us, multiply us,
and change us to reflect the glory of our Creator
now and through all eternity;
and the blessing...

All Amen.

Go in the light and peace of Christ.

All Thanks be to God.