

## Proper 19 Year C 2019

When I was serving my first incumbency in four rural parishes in Devon there was a young family who did a bit of amateur farming on a small holding. Amongst other things they kept a few sheep and bred some lambs. Not surprisingly the children in the family loved the lambs and quickly gave them names. This all seemed fine until the time came for the lambs to go to the abattoir. That was painful enough but worse was to come a few months later; for one Sunday lunchtime a delicious roast lamb appeared on the table and it wasn't long before the children realised, they were eating Bianca, one of the lambs they had named. The meal came to an abrupt end with many tears. They learned never to give names to their lambs again because naming an animal inevitably creates a relationship and all the loyalties and obligations that go with it.

And the power of names to create relationship is something played out in today's Old Testament reading. We heard in that passage how the people of Israel on the long journey through the wilderness started to behave like sheep that were lost. They strayed from loving God and gave their attention instead to things that apparently promised more instant gratification. And the Lord's first reaction was to abandon his people and leave them lost in their own empty

choices. But Moses took issue with the Lord and reminded him that he had loyalties and obligations to his people because he had entered into relationship with them. And the final nail in Moses' argument comes when he tells the Lord to remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The key person in that list is Abraham – for God was the one who had named Abraham; God was the one who had initiated the relationship with him; God was the one who promised Abraham: “I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven.” So, the Israelites may have been like lost sheep, but they were not bit players in God's story. They come from the line of Abraham, whom God named and to whom he made promises; and that means God has an obligation to find them and restore them to new life.

And it is one of the prime characteristics of God throughout the history of Israel that we find him searching for his people when they become lost. And this mission to seek out and save the lost is something that Jesus was sent to share and to proclaim. It's a mission made explicit in this morning's gospel reading in which Jesus tells two parables about finding the lost – the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. But Jesus didn't just *speak* about finding the lost, he actually modelled it for us.

In the Gospel of Luke, from which this morning's parables came, it is significant that the method of finding is portrayed as an openness to the Holy Spirit. Jesus began his public ministry by declaring that "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me". And Jesus goes on to say that he has been sent to release the captives, to give sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free. But Jesus doesn't exercise this ministry on his own initiative. The Holy Spirit seems to put people in his way; the Spirit places people for Jesus to find so that they might be set free and brought to new life. What is required of Jesus is that he is responsive and submissive to the Spirit as he goes about his daily life.

And we see this very clearly a few verses after Jesus declared that the Spirit was upon him. He had had a tiring day preaching and healing in the synagogue in Capernaum. And he then went back for some R and R to the home of Simon Peter. But, instead of the quiet evening he expected the Holy Spirit put before him someone to find and save – Simon Peter's mother-in-law, who was suffering from a high fever. And Jesus was immediately responsive to the promptings of the Spirit and healed her. The point here is that there must have been other mothers-in-law in need across Palestine, but the Holy Spirit led him to be find this particular mother. In his flesh Jesus lived with

all the limitations of being human. He couldn't help every single person in need as Jesus of Nazareth but only those the Holy Spirit put in his path. And this particularity is a feature of this morning's parables. The Shepherd leaves the 99 to look for the one lost sheep; the woman devotes her energy to finding the one lost coin. As human beings we can't help everyone. The only way we know who we should be finding is by being receptive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and noticing the one person that the Spirit puts before us at any one time.

But, following his Resurrection and Ascension Jesus is, of course, no longer limited by time and space. He is able, through the Holy Spirit and his body the Church, to widen his ministry immeasurably. Yet, that ministry never stops being particular and personal. In our second reading this morning St. Paul refers obliquely to his encounter on the Damascus Road. He, like the Israelites earlier, has become lost on life's journey in various ways – he describes himself as “a blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence”. And Jesus found him as he travelled and called him by name – “Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?” And from this encounter, this new relationship, Paul finds what he calls abundant grace, which equips him to become part of the church's mission.

So, we see that the church is now an instrument of Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost. And in our own country the parish system of the Church of England has been fundamental to this ministry for centuries. And one of the graces of the parish system is that everyone within the parish, churchgoers or not, fall within the cure of souls of the local church. The same is true in a different way for cathedrals where, although we don't have a parish, we do encounter a whole range of people in different contexts as part of our mission. But that does not mean we are to think there is some way of exercising the mission of God other than being particular and personal. And, if we have any doubt about that the liturgy puts us right. When we baptise, we baptise people into Christ by name. Jesus has sought them out and begins a relationship with them which involves loyalties and obligations on both sides. And this morning we are delighted that Freddie is to be made a full chorister but notice that he will be admitted by name, all of which speaks of the love and care that Jesus has for Freddie, indeed for every chorister and each one of us.

And all this is a word to us at a time when so often our society fails to notice people as unique individuals or relate to them wholly as themselves. Instead we depersonalise them and label them as immigrants, Remainers, Brexiters or

whatever other group is the focus of our resentment. And as soon as we cease to name human beings or see their particularity, we seem to absolve ourselves from the obligations and loyalties that we owe them as human beings.

I began with a family choosing not to name their sheep and lambs because of the pain and tears it brought them. But if we do the same with people put in our path and fail to notice their humanity or individuality the pain and tears for us as a society will be so much worse. What's more the parables of Jesus we heard today suggest that we will actually be losing a foretaste of the joy of heaven.

I am indebted to Ben Quash and his book "Found Theology" in the writing of this sermon.