

The lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7)
Why does Jesus matter? (Simon Rea)
Sunday Morning 10:45am 2 March 2008

Eze 34:1-16

Lk 15:1-7

Oceanic Flight 815 out of Sydney, Australia is mysteriously brought down out of the sky. After crashing on an uncharted island somewhere in the Pacific Ocean the survivors quickly learn they must work together to stay alive. But the survivors' pasts keep coming back to haunt them - and threaten the group's ability to endure. The doctor and the rock star, the con man and the drama queen - the castaways are all different. But in one way they are all the same. They are all lost.

I wonder how many of you have recognised the TV series I'm talking about? That's right, the new Sky blockbuster with re-runs of old series on Channel 4: Lost.

In our reading from Mark's gospel we also have 3 groups of the lost. They are the sheep in the parable, the tax collectors

and sinners, and the Pharisees and teachers of the law. - they are all different. But in one way they are all the same. They are all lost. Only some of them don't realise it. This morning we're going to look at what the passage means for members each of those three groups, the sheep, the tax collectors and sinners, and the Pharisees and teachers of the law and as we do so we'll learn more about the shepherd in the story and we'll be challenged to think about which of the groups we really belong to.

But first of all we need to think about the background. You see, Jewish society at the time of Jesus was basically divided into two groups- the 'sinners' and the 'saints'. On the one hand you had the Pharisees, who were a lay group of religious enthusiasts and a closely allied group of experts in the holy scriptures whose whole life was given over to interpreting the Old Testament law called the teachers of the law or 'scribes'. These people knew which group they belonged to, in fact they defined it - they were the saints. They were racially pure with family trees which went all the way back to Abraham. And

they were zealous, perhaps even obsessive in the way they kept the Jewish laws. It would be wrong for us here this morning to be too hard on them because, like us, they were the respectable, church-going - sorry synagogue-going folk of their day. And they are my family, the people I spent yesterday with in church at my last uncle's funeral: respectable, sincere religious folk like he himself was, but also the people my own father fled from as soon as he could leave home.

On the other hand you had the 'sinners' - and that meant virtually everyone else. They weren't necessarily immoral people, although adulterers and prostitutes were obviously in this category. No it also included all non-Jews, as well as Jews who were considered ritually compromised because their jobs made them ritually unclean, such as tax collectors and shepherds.

We're going to start with the saints, the scribes and the pharisees. The first verses remind us how little love was lost between them and Jesus. They tell us that these 'saints' were muttering, complaining, grumbling, growling against

Jesus because of the company he kept. The word used to describe what they were doing comes from the one used to describe how the Israelites grumbled against Moses, Aaron and most especially God in the desert (Ex 15:4; 16:2;7-8). The saints are reacting to God's Son just like they reacted to God himself. If only they had read and learned from their scriptures... This reminds us how important it is to read and study all our scriptures carefully , too, so that we don't follow in their footsteps.

We all know the story in the parable. But I wonder whether we all understand how subversive it was for the scribes and Pharisees. Remember Jesus is addressing them when he tells it: Look at v2 the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3 Then Jesus told them this parable: 4 "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them...

What is Jesus getting at? Well, it is that the religious leaders are responsible for the sheep, that is people God loves, for being lost in the first place as well as their duty to do

something about it. Why do I say that? Remember our first reading? In the first part, Ezekiel is prophesying against the shepherds of Israel. They have been derelict in their duties and have looked after themselves, not their flock. The flock are God's people, the shepherds are the rulers, kings and religious teachers, who rather than caring for the sheep have more or less killed them by failing to teach God's Word, and by treating people harshly they have cut them off from God's saving love. That is the case here in Jesus' time, things haven't changed much, so there's a real warning in this for all who lead churches and teach God's word, here, too. The scribes and pharisees would have understood what Jesus was talking about right away. But they would have thought of themselves as the shepherds described in the second part of our OT reading: good, caring shepherds, not like those in the first part.

Jesus doesn't let them get away with that and so in the parable he highlights the personal responsibility of the shepherd for all the lost sheep (the sinners surrounding him as well as the saints) by saying 'suppose YOU have lost one'. He is

saying that the shepherds - that means the religious leaders are responsible. It's like he's turning on his grumbling critics and saying, 'You lost your sheep. I went after it and brought it home. Now you've got the nerve to come and whinge at me for doing your work. Don't you realize I am making up for your mistakes? These are the lost sheep you see around me, the very ones you should have been looking after all along, but no, you stayed in your own religious bubble and left them to fend for themselves.' Jesus is speaking principally to the pharisees here but the sinners and his own disciples must be hearing him, too. So at the same time as tearing another strip off the pharisees, he's also reminding the sinners that they are lost and warning the disciples that they too need to follow his example as the good shepherd and not be like the bad shepherds Ezekiel was talking about. In the same way, we can't put his words to one side because we're not bishops or vicars who leadership roles in the church. Jesus calls all who follow him to search for the lost and bring back the strays and to bind up the injured and strengthen the weak because that's what

he did, too. You don't need to wear a dog collar to go and talk to an old friend or neighbour who's not been to church for years or to listen to someone who's in pain or troubles through bereavement of illness.

What about the shepherd in the story Jesus told? Who is the shepherd? The Jews of Jesus' day would have identified him straight away: The shepherd is God. They knew that because Psalm 23 tells us that 'the Lord is my shepherd'. Isaiah 40: 11 says [He] The sovereign Lord tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."

And of course our reading from Ezekiel:34:11-12''For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness."

The shepherd in the story is God. That was obvious but it was also obvious that the shepherd in the story was Jesus

himself. What does that mean? If God is the shepherd and Jesus is the shepherd, then that means that Jesus is God. The logic behind that would almost certainly not have gone unnoticed by the pharisees. Jesus is telling them who he is and why he matters: Jesus is telling them that he is God. That would have left them lost for words!

And so we come to the other groups of the lost. The sinners and tax collectors and the sheep in the story. Well I suppose you can't really call the lost sheep a group but you know what I mean!

On one level, the sinners and tax collectors were the only ones who knew that they were lost. Many of them weren't part of the mainstream society, they were people on the edge of respectability. Some would have been the sort of people who came to John the Baptist to be baptised in the Jordan as a sign of regret and repentance for their old ways. Some might not even have dared to think themselves worthy of that. Others might have been dragged along by the current of curiosity which followed Jesus wherever he went. But no matter what their motives

were, Jesus was there with them. He didn't turn them away because they didn't follow the religious rituals to the letter - or even at all. In fact the gospels tell us how again and again he deliberately sought them out. Later in this gospel Luke tells us how Jesus said to one of them, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." [Lk 19:9-10]. That man's name was Zacchaeus but I know that it could just as easily have been William Rea, that was my father or Simon Rea, that was me. For many years there was much in my life that was much more like theirs than the 'saints' but I can testify to the joy at finding out that the good shepherd really does seek out and save the lost.

But there is a also more sinister side to the sinners and tax collectors. In this passage they are all flocking to see Jesus but in a few days time they will be following the scribes and pharisees like sheep as they become part of the plot to slaughter Jesus like a lamb.

Then there's the sheep in the story. The

sheep has a couple thing in common with both the sinners and the saints: Like the sinners it was clearly lost and like the "saints" it probably didn't know it was lost. So it doesn't matter whether you identify with either group, you can probably find a way to identify with the sheep! What can we learn from the sheep? The sheep need to let the good shepherd to find them so that they can be part of that great rejoicing in heaven. The same is true for all of us, too: We need to let the good shepherd find us, so that we, too, can be part of the great party in heaven he has planned for all who will follow him.

According to the programme's producers, Lost will end during the 2009-2010 season with a "highly anticipated and shocking finale". It's not clear if they know what that end will be like yet. We don't know whether the castaways will remain lost or whether some, all or none of them will survive. The Bible doesn't tell us when our story will end but it does tell us that the end will be full of rejoicing for those all who let themselves be found by the good shepherd.