

16th Sunday after Trinity, Year C

1 Timothy 1.1-2, 12-19a, Luke 15.1-10

Introduction

The two parables that you've just listened to – the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin – are told because God's son, Jesus was making a real habit of hanging out with all the 'wrong' people, talking with them, eating with them, having a party with them. These two stories are deep, but exciting ways of saying: 'This is why we're celebrating! Wouldn't *you* have a party if it were you? How could we *not*!? Jesus is throwing open a huge window on what he thought he was doing and what we ourselves should be doing.

The heart of the trouble was the character of the people Jesus was eating with on a regular basis. We're pretty familiar with the sort of people Jesus ate with. That's not exactly news for us. Tax-collectors? Check. Prostitutes? Check. Beggars? Check. The list goes on. But one of the things that we can sometimes miss, in this great chapter (which includes the Parable of the Prodigal Son), is that Jesus doesn't say that such people were simply to be accepted as they stand. Yes, sinners have a place. But they must repent. Often the caricature of Christianity is that everybody can come to the party but they don't need to change. That's definitely not the case. The lost sheep and the lost coin *are found*. The prodigal son comes to his senses and *returns home*. Change is expected. But the repentance – the change – Jesus has in mind is not an adoption of purity standards and law-observance. For Jesus, when people follow him and his entire way of life, that's true repentance, that's true life; check out what Paul's saying about himself in his first letter to Timothy. He was lost, but now he's found. He's repented of his violent persecution of the early church and now he's an apostle of Jesus himself. Paul's testimony about his own transformation is the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin brought to life.

And the point of the parables is clear. Because people are changing, heaven's partying, the angels are joining in and if we don't celebrate in the same way for the same reasons, we'll be out of tune with God's reality, God's world, God's kingdom.

In the stories of the sheep and the coin, the punch line in each case depends on the clear Jewish (and by extension Christian) belief that the two halves of God's creation, heaven and earth, are meant to fit together and be in harmony with each other. If we get a look at what's happening in heaven, we'll discover how things are meant to be here on earth. That's why we pray that God's kingdom will 'come on earth as in heaven.' Of course, back then the Pharisees, the Priests and the Lawyers were pretty dead set that the closest you could get to heaven was to be in the Temple. To be in the Temple you needed to be a priest. To be a priest in the Temple you needed to follow the purity code. Thus the best bet for a non-priest to copy the life of heaven was to maintain a similar strictness in purity. But now Jesus has declared that heaven was a having a great, noisy party every time a single sinner saw the light and began to follow God's way.

Thus if we want to copy the life of heaven we should break out the good tea, the sweetest jam, the creamiest cream and the highest quality scones over Morning Tea. But not only that, worship God in the same way, bringing praise to him, being joyous in his presence, having a party. Because that's what Jesus is doing.

The particular sheep and the particular coin weren't themselves 'special' in some highly-prized unique way. The whole point of the parable is that they were they lost. That's the only difference. Imagine the kind of impact this would have had on the first listeners. They didn't have to earn God's love or Jesus' respect. He loved coming to look for them and celebrated finding them. He loves looking for you and celebrates when he finds you. And what Jesus does – God does. Jesus' actions on earth correspond exactly to God's love in heaven. If Paul was so transformed by the grace and love of Jesus, the son of God, then what will happen when God's grace and love come to you right now?