

## THE HOMILY

*May the words of my mouth, + and the meditation of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable in Thy sight, O lord, our strength, and our Redeemer.*

### **HOW MUCH DOES GOD LOVE ME?**

When times are very hard, when we are alone, ill, or life seems threatening (as it is presently in our pandemic) or when things just do not seem to go our way, the question “*How much does God really love me?*” can often enter our minds.....

Today the Gospel reading deals with that very matter....

In its Biblical context, Jesus is being criticized for eating with publicans and sinners. The self-righteous men of the Pharisees and Scribes see this as an affront, for how can a so-called ‘holy man’ be associated with sinners. In their spiritual arrogance, they fail to understand that God’s love extends to all people, and that the lost ones are they that need His special care.

Jesus answers his critics directly, by telling a powerful story, one that has resonated throughout history, The Parable of the Lost Sheep. Jesus makes it plain to them that however odd the people may be with whom he is sitting, they are infinitely precious in the eyes of God, and that His mission is to bring them all (the Pharisees included) back into the loving arms of the Father.

**“What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.” — Luke xv. 4— 7.**

The sheep that is lost represents the souls of those separated from God by sin, wandering aimlessly on a path to destruction. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is prepared to take the hardest road, the loneliest path, in order to find and bring back the person who has lost their way in life. No-one is too lost, too vile, or too unworthy of the Good Shepherd’s affection, and he will go to the ends of the earth to find the person who is lost and needs redemption. That is the same message as was told in last week’s Gospel (Luke 14:6ff) concerning the Great Feast. In the end, “*The master of the house said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind....*” ...all are welcome.



Let us think about this parable for a moment. The shepherd casts his eye over the flock – he can see only 99...we are told that the Good Shepherd ‘*knoweth his sheep...*’ and in his mind’s eye he can see the lost sheep. Is it in danger, has it fallen into a ditch? A sheep is lost, and that consumes him. He will not rest, or eat, or return home until he has found that lost one! Of all the creatures, a lost sheep is the most vulnerable and most helpless; it has no protection against what lies out in the world. Note that these sheep are HIS; the shepherd is not a hireling, and so the loss is personal – precious. It is his own sheep that is lost – he must find it!

The same applies to the coin in the second parable; it is HER coin, not that of another, and so she is diligent in her search until she finds that which is lost. The message is the same.

We must apply this parable of the Lost Sheep to ourselves. The message is that each of the sheep is precious to the Good Shepherd – the parable is not dealing with a mass of humanity, it is dealing with you and me as

precious individuals in the eyes of the Shepherd – that is why it is such a wonderful message about God’s love for me!

In an age where there are so many people who feel that they are irrelevant and ‘just a number’, we are being told that we are seen by God as unique, as precious *and* as worth saving!

We are so precious, in fact, that Jesus tells us:

*“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.” [Jn10:14,15]*

It is very important to note that the shepherd goes to seek his sheep and will not be distracted by any other thing until he has found it and brought it home. It could rain or snow, the dangers could be great, but the Shepherd will go on until he has found that which was lost. His love is so great!

There are many times, my dear brothers and sisters when we have wandered off, not even sparing a thought about God’s role in our lives. Perhaps we have friends or children, or other members of our families, who think nothing of Faith or of God’s great Love? In those times, when we are so self-absorbed, and not even aware of His presence, the Good Shepherd is still seeking us out, and seeking them out, to restore us all to His flock, despite our often deliberate carelessness.

The love of God for us is all-consuming. The Comfortable Words tell us that :

*“So God loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in His should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (Jn 3:16)*

Now that we understand just how much God loves us, how can we fail to respond in humble gratitude to such love? How can we be so hard-hearted as to put the Good Shepherd through such trials to find us in our wanderings? I do believe that this parable calls us all to change our ways and to honour the Saviour and Shepherd of our souls, by living lives that are disciplined and obedient, and filled with gratitude! To answer the original question...Yes, God’s love for me is very wonderful!



*“All we, like sheep, were gone astray, but now we have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls” [1 Peter 2:25 building on Isaiah 53:6]*

*In the Name + of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*