

# Homily for Parishes in the Western Region without clergy

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> September 2019, Pentecost 14

Readings: **Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28**

**Psalms 14**

**1 Timothy 1:1-2, 12-19**

**Luke 15:1-10**

When preparing people for Confirmation over the years I have asked them to draw a picture of God and them together, and it has been fascinating to see the range of responses. Sometimes God would be massive, and the person very small! Sometimes the person was big, and a small image of God was drawn in the person's heart. Sometimes God was smiling, and sometimes scowling. Sometimes God was beside the person, and sometimes God was as far away from the person as it was possible to portray on a page.

If you had to draw that picture would God be near you, or far away? Would God be inside you, or beside you? Would God be smiling, or scowling? Maybe your imagining has been influenced by the paintings of Renaissance artists, who pictured God as a muscular old man with white hair, looking down on us from the clouds?

In the Gospel this week Jesus is remembered suggesting that God is like a shepherd who has lost a sheep, and a woman who has lost a coin! Both seem curious from a twenty first century Australian perspective, but with a bit of background there is a common quality about God that is hugely encouraging.

Remember that sheep farming then, in that part of the world, was quite different to sheep farming in Australia today. A shepherd would have looked after a much smaller number of sheep with some commentators suggesting that the average number would have been between forty and seventy. The flock of one hundred sheep that Jesus described would have been regarded as a big flock at that time. Shepherds did not have dogs to drive the sheep before them, but walked in front leading the flock. The sheep knew the sound of the shepherd's voice and followed him. So, when one sheep went missing it would have been noticed by the shepherd, who would have ensured the safety of the flock before leaving them to find the one that was missing.

Shepherds did not have a great status in the Jewish community. Because of their work they were generally unable to attend the synagogue, or go to the temple, so describing God as a shepherd would have been confronting for first century Jewish communities.

It would also have been confronting for them to hear God likened to a woman searching for a coin, because in Jewish communities women in first century Palestine were regarded as less important than men. Apparently when a Jewish woman was married she would be given a belt with silver coins so we can understand the missing coin to be one of these. In our terms it would be like someone who had lost their wedding ring and was searching for it.

The common quality between the male shepherd and the Jewish woman is that they noticed something was missing, and searched for it until it was found, with the clear inference that God is like this. God notices when people become lost, and searches for them until they are found.

It is quite normal for people to feel lost at times in the course of their life's journey. When we're asked how we're going we'll generally respond by saying 'fine' or 'good' even when this is not true. And, I think we do this because we don't want to trouble the other person, or risk them thinking that we're not coping with life! But, in our minds we can feel un-lovely and unloved for many reasons. It could be based on

things that we've done, or things that have happened to us. It could be griefs about things that have been lost; hopes that can never be realised; or, behaviours that others look down on. The list could go on for pages, but I think you get the picture! For many complex reasons we can feel utterly unworthy of love, perceive ourselves to be failures, and despair of finding anything good in life.

The parable of the Prodigal Son offers such hope to this human experience for it suggests that God's love is more generous than any experience of human love. That God is like a father who never stops loving his son no matter what he does, no matter how much hurt he has caused, and no matter where he has been. But, in that parable the father waits for the son to return to him. In the two parables of this weekend's Gospel, Jesus suggests that God will search for those who are lost.

No matter the weather, or the danger involved, the shepherd will search for the lost sheep until it is found, and then carry it back to the flock on his shoulders. And, no matter how long it takes to find the missing coin the woman will thoroughly search each room, and all the corners of the yard until that coin is found, before celebrating this reunion with friends.

So, if you are feeling emotionally and spiritually lost at this time – hear this good news. The Gospel tells us that God is actively searching for you and reaching out in love. If you are feeling emotionally and spiritually lost, it may be time to share this with someone you trust who can support and pray with you.

But, if you're feeling emotionally and spiritually strong there is still something important because we've been powerfully reminded that if God has a heart to reach out to the lost, then we should also seek to have a compassionate heart. So... who is on your heart at this time? Who do you have a sense is feeling lost? Are you praying for God's blessing on them, and could God be calling you, or me, to reach out to that person? Maybe invite them to go with you for a walk, or share a cuppa, trusting that God's Spirit will be in the midst of that conversation and relational space. We might ask the person, 'How are you going?' and if this is laughed off, we might ask again, 'How are you really going?'

Let's pray...

God of grace, we give thanks for our lives, and for the way that Jesus teaches us about your generous love. Through your Spirit help us to recognise a person this week who is feeling lost and give us wisdom about how best to reach out to them with love. We pray in the name of Christ, our Good Shepherd. Amen.