

“Joy and more joy” Luke 15:1-10

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. “Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.” Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

By this time most of you would have noticed that we have been recently talking more and more about the main mission of the Church, that is, about reaching to those who don't know Jesus Christ as their Saviour yet.

These two parables which we heard today can help us to reflect on this topic as well. We can look at Jesus own example; who did He tried to reach, and how does He explain what He does.

We can see real division happening here. The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to here Jesus. But the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling. “What is wrong with this Jesus, He receives sinners and eats with them.”

Inviting someone for lunch or dinner had pretty much the same meaning then as it has today. If you invite someone to eat together with you, it means that you accept that person, you want to have some kind of relationships with them.

Jesus was having meals together with the tax collectors and sinners, that is, with real sinners of His time, not imaginary. Responding to Jesus' welcoming attitude, all these sinners were drawn to Him, and wanted to listen to what He had to say.

The good people of that day, on the other hand, got upset. What kind a teacher is He, who don't even know how to choose proper friends. What kind of example can He show? So they were grumbling at Jesus for His poor taste in people.

For He wasn't hanging out with good people, noble people, well respected people, with those who can say, as I have so many times heard it in Barossa, and I am sure you have too, “I haven't done anything wrong, I have been pretty good a person.”

No, Jesus was spending time with those who couldn't say that, who knew that they haven't been good enough, who knew they have done lots of wrongs. It is so comforting to know that. It means hope and good news for everyone.

Regardless of where you have been, and what you have done. Jesus welcomes everyone, you hear!, everyone who repents and desires His forgiveness. All sorts of people. And if you think you are not good enough for the Church, then know, this is the right place for you, Jesus is here for you, as for all repentant sinners.

We don't have exactly the same problem as Jesus had. Good people of Barossa don't accuse us for hanging out with sinners. At least I haven't heard it yet. I really wish we gave these good people more reasons to accuse us for welcoming sinners.

So, how did Jesus respond to this grumbling? By telling these three parables about lost sheep, lost coin and two lost sons. We will only look today at the first one.

Thus Jesus told them:

“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.”

With this parable Jesus asked the Pharisees and the scribes to imagine themselves in the role of shepherds, for they actually were meant to be shepherds of God's people. And to great extent we can apply this parable also to God's people today, to ourselves.

Apparently in the Middle East when people kept their sheep out in the open fields during the day, with the flock of this size, there was always more than one shepherd. And what do you do, if you have lost one of your sheep?

You have to go to search for it. What about the rest, are they not important? It's not like you are ignoring the rest, they are left with the other shepherds to lead them safely home. The point is not that this one is more important than these ninety nine.

The point is, that this one needs you more than the ninety nine. This one is lost, and she can't find her way back on her own. Therefore you go and search until you find it. This is exactly what Jesus ministry was, and what our is - searching for the lost.

Sure, it is easier to stay together with the ninety-nine. No need to go anywhere, no need to put in extra efforts. However, we can't just stay all the time where we feel better, knowing that there are those who are lost.

For if we don't go and search for them, then they will die. The lost sheep can't find their way back. They need someone to find them and to help. Therefore we can take some tips from this parable for our own priorities as well.

Of course, Jesus is the great Shepherd, He Himself brings together His sheep in His Church. But then, He has also left His Church, that is – us, to continue to do what He begun – to search for the lost. He does it through us.

Let's take a closer look at how this searching is described in this parable, for there are important things we need to notice and learn. The shepherd goes “after the one that is lost, until he finds it. When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.”

This is how the searching for the lost is done. You leave your comfort zone, you go and look for the lost. And when you look for them you find them. But this is not the end. Not at all. We could say that that is the easy part.

The hardest is only to come. What does the shepherd do when he finds the lost sheep? He just whistles and she gladly follows him home? Of course, not. If only it was that easy. When a sheep is lost, she doesn't know what to do.

She is not smart and able enough to find her way home. Out of fear and confusion she may lose all her strength and just die if no one finds her and rescues. This is how Jesus described the actions of the shepherd.

He finds her and puts her on his shoulders. Why? No to play with her, not to be friendly, but because she probably has lost her ability to walk, he has to carry her home. I actually haven't tried to carry a sheep, but the last week I saw some nice Merino rams, and I wouldn't rejoice thinking that I need to carry one.

This is the hardest part. Once the lost sheep is found, the shepherd carries her home, to the village. When we think what this parable tells about our task as the Church of Christ, we can see that the searching for the lost is not an easy thing.

It doesn't end with finding someone who is lost. Once you have found them, the hard work only begins. How so? Because when you find someone who is lost, and they meet Jesus for the first time, then don't change into wonderful people of God overnight.

They are still in their lives where they were. These can be messy lives, these can be broken lives, these can be and often are lives full with different problems, where no one sees how to get out of them; broken relationships, addictions, violence, bad friends, inability to adjust to the expectations of our society, and so on.

This is where the hard lifting happens. This is what Paul the apostle means by new life in Christ. It is about teaching new converts how to live as Christians, learning God's wisdom and will for all aspects of their lives.

When step by step, guided by the Word of God, helped by the Holy Spirit, the lost sheep are slowly restored back to life for which they were created. It takes time. It takes energy.

Think about carrying the lost sheep across Barossa hills on your shoulders. It is a hard work. For sure it is much easier to stay with the ninety nine, much, much easier, except – then the lost ones will perish. Not only physically, but also eternally.

There is something strange in what Jesus said. He said that the shepherd rejoices when he finds the sheep, even as he knows what will follow. At first sight, it may seem strange. Why to rejoice? Because of all the hard work that will follow?

Perhaps it is hard to picture why this shepherd would rejoice; but what if for a while we replace the shepherd and sheep image with parent and child image, or any other of our loved ones?

They are lost, they are dying, and we have found them, and there is this hope of healing and restoration. Yes, there is a lot of work involved, but still. Wouldn't we rejoice greatly? Of course, we would.

The same is true when we think about us as the Church of Jesus Christ searching for the lost. We find them, and then the hard work of teaching, shaping and restoration begins. But what a joy it is, – we have found our lost brothers or sisters.

We have found someone who was about to die, eternally, and now we are bringing them to eternal life. This is one of the greatest joys that we as Christians can experience. Joy for the lost are found.

Joy, for we will be with them in God's eternal Kingdom. Of course, the hard lifting part doesn't disappear. But it is also true, and you know it, the greater the effort, the more we sacrifice for the sake of others, the greater is our joy.

“And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

This is it. When we see someone who didn't know Jesus as their Saviour, changing their ways and beginning to follow Jesus, that is a wonderful, joyful, and heart-warming experience. For the whole church.

It fills the whole church with joy, it uplifts our spirit, seeing how the Holy Spirit accomplishes His lives-changing work. And we need to be clear, it is a joyful event not only here on earth.

With every repentant sinner who returns to God and receives the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of eternal life, there is great joy in heaven as well. The whole Kingdom of God celebrates salvation of one more beloved child of God.

It was true also about you. The whole heavenly host rejoiced when Jesus found you and took you on His shoulders to carry you home. And we have this unbelievable privilege to be a part of this incredible mystery of God's salvation.

Concluding, just a little reminder for us. It's true that now we are members of God's Church, and it's true that we are sent to search for the lost and to do the heavy lifting restoring their lives and teaching how to lead this new life in Christ.

But, at the same time, we all are like little lambs to Jesus. He is your good Shepherd. He knew that you were lost, He knew that you wouldn't be able to find your way back to the Father's house.

He was the One, who went searching for you. Jesus knew that if He didn't find you, you would be lost forever. He was the One who took you on His shoulders and brought you here, where you can be together with all God's people.

And, remember, that is Jesus, who still carries you. Being members of God's church, and being sent to search for the lost, we can easily forget, that Jesus still carries us. Every day. From day to day.

We wouldn't be here, if He stopped, if He would take His Spirit from us, if He would leave us on our own. This is Jesus as your Good Shepherd who sends the Holy Spirit into your hearts.

That's Him who is with you in the hardest moments of your life. That's Him who patiently speaks to you, teaches you, shares His wisdom with you, and gently restores you with His Spirit.

That is always Him. Always Jesus. And when the time comes, your dear Saviour Jesus Christ Himself will bring you into His Kingdom, where you will rejoice together with all the heavenly hosts, for on that day all the lost sheep will finally be brought back home.

This is what we can learn from this parable. There are many opportunities to rejoice doing the will of our dear Saviour, even if it involves some hard lifting, and there are so many reasons for joy, and so many reasons for hope.

And the peace of God that surpasses all our understanding, keep your minds and hearts safe in Jesus Christ. Amen.