

BIBLE READINGS: Romans 13:8-14 Matthew 18:10-20

SERMON

The parable of the Lost Sheep - What a story! And one of the most interesting things about it is that Matthew and Luke report Jesus as giving two different endings (cf Luke 15:3-7)

Personally I like the ending in Luke better than the one in Matthew. "In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine respectable people who do not need to repent." Repentance has such a nice ring to it. It has shades of fire and brimstone, of remorse and guilt.

It implies that the sinner who turns from their sin and turns to the shepherd produces much joy and celebration in heaven.

I like that. A sinner who repents. There is substance - Quid pro Quo. Tit for Tat - I'm not so certain about how Jesus tells the story in Matthew. Jesus mentions nothing here of repentance. In fact, the shepherd is happy because he has found the lost not for any action it performed.

Is Jesus saying here that forgiveness is unconditional? In Luke he certainly isn't. But then straight after the parable in Matthew Jesus give his disciples instructions on church discipline. If your brother or sister sins against you, tell them about it. If that doesn't work, take along a couple of witnesses. If they still don't do right, treat them like a gentile or a tax-collector.

That'll fix 'em! Go seek them out, but if they fail to repent, let them be cursed to outer darkness. After the parable and its friendly ending, here is some real substance.

What a relief that Jesus threw in this teaching. "Treat them like gentiles and tax collectors!" What if he hadn't, how were we supposed to act toward our brother and sister who sins against us? Just forget it? Keep on forgiving them?

Well at least we can begin to see how to treat these sinning brothers and sisters - as Gentiles - like another race, another religion, persecutors of God's people; as Tax Collectors - collaborators with the Romans in fleecing their own people. Apparently there are limits, even to the forgiveness expected of Jesus' own people, the church.

But Jesus is a tricky sort of character - just when you think you've pinned him down - "Ah - that's what he means!", you miss what he was really telling you. Things are not always that straight forward with Jesus. You think Jesus means one thing only to discover later that he meant something different.

The key is to interpret what Jesus **SAYS** by what he **DOES**. "If someone wrongs you, tell it to his face. If that doesn't work, tell the church. If that fails, treat him as you would a Gentile and a tax collector. That'll fix him! And we think we know what that would mean. Excommunicate, incarcerate. That's what we would do.

But perhaps Jesus doesn't mean what we would mean; Jesus would not *do* what we would do.

Who are the first to recognise who Jesus is and come and worship him - Matthew 2 its the Magi - *gentile* magi. Who is one of the first people Jesus heals in Matthew's gospel - the

servant of a *gentile* army officer! And then one day he called a man named Matthew to be his disciple (Matthew 9:9-13). Question: What was Matthew's occupation? He was a TAX COLLECTOR. When Jesus says "treat those who offend / sin against you as a gentile or tax collector" - he means for us to treat them with love - to woo them into his kingdom.

You can't keep the church pure, you can't keep it clean. Unless our church is crowded with sinners, gentiles and tax collectors, we are in the wrong place. Maybe we ought to have church in the Businessman's Club across the road?

Jesus tells us that there will be conflict in the church, and not just a little bit - he gives specific instructions on how to cope with it. We also learn that we are to confront conflict, not avoid it. The church is not a neat, tidy place where festering, but lovingly nursed wounds and grudges are bandaged in smiles and politeness.

Jesus loves to forgive and he calls us to forgive. Peter listens to Jesus, but still doesn't get it - he asks in Matthew 18:21 - "My brother keeps on sinning against me - how many times do I have to forgive him?"

After he called Matthew, the tax collector, to be his disciple, Jesus said (Matthew 9:13) "I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts."

When will we learn, when will we finally hear Jesus' words.

His call is for outcasts, for sinners, for the lonely, the lost - his command to his disciples is to search and call and love and forgive as he has searched, called, loved and forgiven them. Unless we have a heart for the outcast, unless we have a heart for forgiveness and love, in other words a heart that doesn't harbour spite and hurt, grudges and hate, we will be like the respectable people of Jesus' day who rejected him and found no good news in his message.

The good news is that as God looks into your heart and mine he sees gentiles and tax collectors. We are the sheep the shepherd is seeking - we are just the sort of sheep Jesus loves to save, just the sort of gentiles and tax collectors Jesus loves to forgive.

Thanks be to God!