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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : September 15th, 2019
“Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity”

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I went to Southend for the day recently and was just walking onto the pier when a young mother started to shout hysterically that she'd lost her son. We all started to look for him, being guided as best we could from the vague description the sobbing mother gave. It wasn't long before said boy turned up: he'd wandered off by himself to buy an ice cream. His mother's relief was wonderful for all to see – though this quickly turned to understandably righteous anger: the parable of the lost sheep?

Then the other day I was sitting on a tube train. Everyone was quiet, either reading or playing with their phones. Then suddenly the man sitting opposite me sat up with a jolt and started to pat his pockets with some urgency. His movements became more comical and frenetic. He looked terrified. He leapt to his feet and starting giving himself a complete pat-down. Then he searched through his bag – and immediately his whole body relaxed again as he found – his phone: the parable of the lost coin?

We all know something of these or similar experiences. From time immemorial, human beings have acted in the same way: the sudden realisation of horror that something is lost which turns into pure panic which becomes manic searching – which then can become happiness and relief when found or lasting sadness if not found. We can all spend enormous amounts of time and effort searching for things we lose – and Jesus parallels this with the efforts that God our heavenly Father will go to to rescue humans who get lost.

So it is hardly surprising that Jesus asks the people these easily understood questions – how you would feel if you lost a sheep or a coin – as examples, as parables when he

was wanting to tell off the Pharisees, the Jewish leaders, and the teachers of the law who were muttering under their breath that Jesus was mixing all too freely and liberally with these... these people – tax-collectors and sinners. Undoubtedly Jesus was exasperated with their unbending attitude and his sarcasm shines through the account. But of course Jesus was trying to make the point that whilst it is sad to mislay a coin or lose a sheep, it is as nothing compared with the sadness that God feels when a human being is lost to a sinful life – for God says ‘hate the sin but love the sinner’.

This theme is echoed in our other reading. From the first letter to Timothy, we have Paul, full of humility, conscious of his human frailty and reminding his readers of why Christ came in the first place – he came into the world to save sinners. That truth is as fundamental to Paul in his frail humanity as it should be to us in ours.

But of course the world generally thinks otherwise. The world fondly imagines that Christian churches are full of people who are good, maybe even perfect – certainly ‘holier than thou’. But we know differently because we know ourselves. We know that the church is actually filled with people who know their need of God; people who are aware of their human frailty, who are sinners and who have to totally rely on God’s grace through his ready forgiveness of everything we do which we know to be wrong.

It is why every act of worship starts with time and space for us to confess our sins – and to receive assurance from God that he does forgive us and wants us to start again. I was in an old church in Durham recently and was struck that the altar was adorned on either side by the 10 commandments – something not unusual in many churches – presumably a clear reminder for the congregation of the God-given laws which they had to follow to prevent them from sinning.

But of course the recognition that we are all sinners, that we all need God’s grace, should not be something which depresses us – but should be seen as something that is wonderfully liberating and life-giving. We are a new creation; we are accepted and forgiven; we are God’s for ever. And that should be a real cause of thanksgiving and celebration.

So when we come into church Sunday by Sunday, we will bring our burdens with us – the people we are concerned about, the issues which have knocked us during the

week, the things which have gone wrong, as well as an awareness of the things that we have done which we know, in our heart of hearts, to be wrong. And there is the opportunity in our worship to offer all of these to God and leave them on the altar, knowing that he is much more able cope than are we. And then we can leave this place with a spring in our step, because our burdens have been lifted, our sins have been forgiven and we know that God hears our prayers, knows our thoughts – and we can carry on into a new week revelling in all that God has done for us. So we can be full of thanks that our God has a searching heart of love looking out for us, very aware of our humanity and frailty, and all too ready to forgive us and help us to start again.

And just a final word for those of us who are really weighed down by our sins and who never quite believe the truth that God can forgive us and help us to start again. At the end of his meditative prayer called Sin, the French priest Michel Quoist imagines God saying to the sinner: “Come, my son/daughter, look up. Do you think that there’s a limit to God’s love? Do you think that for a moment I stopped loving you? But you still rely on yourself. You must rely only on me. Ask my pardon and get up quickly. You see, it’s not falling that is the worst, but staying on the ground.” Amen.