**1 Timothy 1: 12-17; Luke 15: 1-10** the lost sheep, the lost coin (and the Prodigal Son)

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

That phrase from Timothy that we heard in the first reading is important to our understanding of today’s gospel: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. To save. So this is about salvation.

And Jesus talks about a lost sheep and a lost coin, but what I want to ask first is: in salvation terms, are we kittens or monkeys?

The mother cat picks the kitten up by the scruff of the neck and carries it because it can do nothing for itself; whereas the baby monkey holds its arms up to tell the mother it wants to be picked up, then the mother comes and puts it on her back and carries it that way. You can sort of see how the metaphor came about. So the question might be: do we contribute to our own salvation or not? Do we lie there helpless, in a manner of speaking, waiting for God to notice us and pick us up by the scruff of the neck? Or do we have to lift our arms and ask to be carried?

We have only heard two stories today, but really there is a set of three stories one after another that belong together in Luke 15. They come as a unit, and for that reason, in order to make sense of the lost sheep and the lost coin, we need briefly to refresh our memories about the Prodigal Son story too.

So, then, there were two sons and a father. The younger son wanted to leave home and experience all that life could offer, so he asked if he could have his inheritance early. Off he went travelling and, being a bit of a party animal, he spent all the money on wine, women and song. When eventually the cash ran out, he looked for work, but there was famine in this distant land and all he could find was a job as a pig herd. He was so hungry that he would have eaten the pig food if he could. That set him thinking about home and how attractive it seemed now. He gathered his courage, knowing he was going to have to apologise to his Father, and went home.

He expected to get a bit of a rocket, but before he even got the chance to apologise, it was clear that his Father was thrilled to see him. A Coming Home party was organised, no expense spared. That was fine, except that the older brother, the one who had stayed at home being the dutiful and hard-working one, was deeply hacked-off that their father should be so pleased to see this absolute renegade, and refused to go to the party. We suppose that in due course the older son got over himself, because the father’s reasoning was: your brother was dead and is alive; he was lost and is now found.

If we go back, briefly, to why Jesus tells these three stories, we note that the Pharisees and scribes are complaining about the amount of time Jesus spends hanging out with tax-collectors and sinners; and not just hanging out with them but sharing meals with them. Partying with them. And this doesn’t suit the Pharisees and their mates. They look down on the rabble. They think they are better than the rabble and they should be having dinner parties with Jesus instead.

So Jesus explains. And when we look at all three together, we realise that the stuff about whether we are kittens or monkeys isn’t relevant. Jesus is describing how God is. We read the Bible because it gives us insight into the nature of God. And we are in each of these situations.

We are the lost sheep; stuck in the brambles and all we can do is cry out and hope that the Shepherd comes to find us.

We are the lost coin: dead, inert, having rolled into the darkest corner, lost among the fluff and dust and toenail clippings, unable even to cry out. But God is the woman doing the cleaning, looking constantly for the coin until it is found.

And we are the prodigals: the ones who move wilfully away, not wanting to have anything to do with the Father. Until we come to our senses, when we turn round and are met by the Father with an embrace we didn’t expect.

And this is the context.  These parables are addressed to the Scribes and Pharisees.  The Scribes and Pharisees were the most religious of people:  they attended church every Friday night; they were big financial supporters of the synagogue; they didn’t eat pork; they lived in every way according to the Law. And they thought that they were the ‘found’ and everyone else was the ‘lost’. The insiders were the found; and the outsiders were the lost.  But this was a problem because Jesus was attracted to the so-called outsiders; he sought out the company of all the outsiders. And ate with them.

These Scribes and Pharisees came up to Jesus one day, and Jesus, knowing their attitude towards the outsiders and the lost, told them the story of the lost sheep. The Pharisees were smiling smugly to themselves because they agreed with the story: God always goes out to find the lost; that is, those people outside their church e.g. the tax collectors and tanners and camel drivers.  Maybe even the carpenters.

And Jesus continued: the shepherd found the lost sheep, and there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who truly repents than over 99 good people, who don’t think they are lost. At which point the Pharisees were getting the feeling that this parable was directed at them; but they weren’t sure.

So Jesus told them a second parable.  The one about the lost coin. And the Pharisees were really happy because they could see how relevant it was: God is methodical and careful as God searches for the lost, who are precious to Him.  And Jesus continued: there is joy in heaven over one sinner who truly repents, and over a good person who doesn’t know that he or she is lost and in need of repentance.  And the Pharisees sensed again that Jesus was talking about them and they didn’t like the idea that Jesus was implying they were the ones who were lost, because it was so clear to them that they were part of the found.

And how often do we do the same. We fail to realise that he is talking about us: we are the lost sheep. Jesus came for everyone. He’s talking about them. He’s talking about all of us. There is no nine at the end of the day, nor any ninety-nine, because we are all lost. We are all the one.

When it comes down to it, these parables are about completeness. The bringing to perfection that we hear about in the Bible isn’t talking about being good or beautiful: perfect in the twenty-first century definition of the word. It is about being made complete. Ten is a complete number; a hundred is a complete number. Until we are sought and found by God, and drawn into the completeness, we are part of the fragmentation of it all. Of what we sometimes say in prayer – of this broken world.

We are living in times of increasing fragmentation; which is against the divine will, which longs to bring us into completeness. God is longing to rescue every single one of us and the whole of Creation. But we need to stop being Pharisees and start being tax-collectors and remembering that we too are sinners.

**Amen**