

St. Paul's Dorking Small Groups 1st March 2009

Good News –for those who have wandered off! Matt 18:10-14



Word: Key points from Sunday's sermon

Recent statistics on Church Attendance continue to reflect a downward trend. There are now on average 51,000 fewer people usually in church on Sunday than there were in 2002:19,000 fewer children and 32,000 fewer adults. Why have so many people 'wandered off?' Another recent survey revealed the following reasons: unfulfilled expectations, change in personal circumstances, loss of faith, pressure of changing values, lack of sense of belonging, unwillingness to commit to the cost of discipleship, reactions to childhood and upbringing. Many had wandered off not because of a crisis about faith or a compulsive desire to live a life of sin and debauchery but because church no longer seems relevant – "another planet," "a past culture," fails to connect with the rest of life." People wandered off because of changes of life that disrupt regular routine such as moving home, University, children growing up, marriage breaking down, illness. These point to the fact that for many faith becomes something of a dull habit so when life changes church may not be part of a new lifestyle. The reality is that many of us will know someone who has 'wandered off' – maybe our own children, friend or family member who no longer seem to share the faith we hold so dear leaving us feeling disappointed, saddened or even heart broken. So where is the Good news in all of this?

In our passage for today we focus on the parable of the Lost Sheep. In Luke's gospel it forms part of a trilogy of parables showing how much God is willing to bring people who are lost to himself – primarily evangelistic. However in Matthew's gospel the emphasis is more pastoral – Jesus teaches us about how much God cares. Lets focus on three characteristics of the love and care for those who have wandered off:

1. Instant Access - Read Verse 10 - God's Love and Care is always Instantly accessible. The term 'little ones' does not mean children but rather those who for one reason or another have strayed from the Church which will include adults and children. The previous verses read 6-9 refer to the vulnerability of those who believe and how easy it could be to be tripped up, how many stumbling blocks there may be. Jesus uses the highly developed Jewish view of angels to emphasise that though some may trip up, stumble and wander off they still have constant access to God. He does not turn his back on them, his face is still turned towards them. In first century Eastern culture it would have been impossible to enjoy a face to face encounter with the King but here Jesus says even though we may have turned our backs on God he does not turn his back on us - we still have instant access to the King of Kings – our Father in heaven.

2. Personal Account – Read Verse 12-13. If we are honest it can seem sometimes as if God doesn't seem to care – Illness, betrayal by those we thought loved us, carefully laid plans unravel, we feel too weak, too depressed to pray and too faithless to hope. It is very easy to echo King David "Why are you downcast O my soul, why so disturbed within me?" Psalm 43:5, and find ourselves far from God..Just like a sheep it is very easy to wander off – a clump of grass here, a clump there and before we know it we are far from the shepherd. Wandering away from the shepherd can be a pretty painful business – a sheep on its back can only be set on its feet again by the shepherd. Jesus said "I am the Good Shepherd...I know my sheep" John 10:14 - I know the paths each one has trod, the illnesses, the trials each has experienced...At night I count each of my sheep as each one is precious...I call each one by name...If one is missing I will walk the pathways, I will call out in the darkness and I will find them. If my sheep are cast down on their backs I will put them back on their feet and restore them to the fold. However stubborn the sheep, however far it may wander. David King and Shepherd boy also wrote "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want" Psalm 23:1. However stubborn, the sheep, however far they may wander the Shepherd will go after them and seek to bring them home. If a sheep developed a habit of wandering off sometimes a first century shepherd would break the sheep's leg, make a splint and carry it close to his heart. The sheep had to wait for the shepherd to carry it across streams and rough ground. After the leg healed the lesson had been learned...a broken leg as a result of a broken heart...this is personal. Jesus said "I am the Good Shepherd I know my sheep and I lay down my very life for them" John 10:14.

3. Shared Account - God invites us to share this personal care for those who have wandered off. The shepherd knows each of his sheep individually and knows which one out of 100 is not there at the end of the day. He cares, he seeks the sheep out and is full of joy when he finds them. Do we?



Witness: questions to discuss

Guidance: Before discussion read the Bible passage, ask God to help you discern what the Spirit wants to say to your group. Consider one or two questions below – don't feel you have to use them all! Make sure there's plenty of room for prayer and ministry.

- 1 What is your reaction to at the Church Attendance statistics? Are you surprised?
- 2 Who do you know that has 'wandered off'? Why do you think they have done so? How do you feel about it? What have you done about it? What more can you do?
- 3 "Faith has become something of a dull habit!" How can the Good News of the Gospel become like this?
- 4 "If we are honest it does seem sometimes as if God doesn't seem to care!" What is your reaction to this statement?
- 5 Spend some time together reflecting on the picture painted of the sheep with the broken leg. Share your thoughts.
- 6 Read the final paragraph of the notes and engage with the question at the end.
- 7 **For further thought:** If Jesus is the Good Shepherd why does he let us wander in the first place?
Use Psalm 23 as a focus for a time of Worship and Prayer