
The Hound of Heaven

Luke 15.1-10

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 16, 2007 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I once knew a young woman who told me “I get so angry with the Bible!” When I asked why, she said that her husband, who was new to Christianity, often had friends round for an evening, and one or two of them would like to pick up a Bible and open it randomly and read out an obscure passage and just laugh at how strange it sounded. For those of us who’ve been led to believe that the Bible is a good common sense guide for living, the young woman’s anger is understandable. Many of us have been led to believe, like her, that the Bible is fundamentally about us, and so of course it should speak to us straightforwardly in language we can understand.

But the truth is the Bible is not fundamentally about us. The Bible is fundamentally about God. And our efforts to translate the truth about God into more or less useful guides for living are never anything other than provisional, and certainly never as tidy as we would like. Take this morning’s reading from the gospel of Luke. Jesus is surrounded by tax collectors and sinners, in other words people whose style of life made them ritually unclean and morally reprehensible. The one thing Israel was called to be above all was holy – remembering the words of Leviticus, “Be holy, for I am holy.” This was the aim of the Pharisees – to make sure, in the minutest particulars, that all the people of Israel were holy. There was no way in the world that the tax collectors and sinners could be holy, so the Pharisees and the scribes said, if this Jesus were truly of God, truly holy, he’d be keeping well away from them.

And then Jesus tells these two stories. If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one goes missing, surely he would leave the ninety-nine and go after the one that was lost; and then, having found the lost sheep, he would lay the animal on his shoulders and rejoice; and on returning home he would have a great party with his friends and neighbors. Likewise if a woman has ten silver coins, and one goes missing, surely she would search her house without pause until she found it; and on discovering the coin, she would have a great party with her friends and neighbors.

Now when we read these stories, tuned in as we are to assuming the Bible is saying something about us, we may think to ourselves, “Well, there sure are some pretty bad people out there. Some of them have made a hefty profit out of sin, like the tax collectors, and others have doubtless hurt themselves as much as anyone else and just ended up making a mess of their lives, like the people Luke calls sinners. But I guess we should be generous and broad minded and care about those whom others might look down on. We should be shepherds who search out the lost, we should be careful householders who treasure each and every coin.” And so we become people who do good. One Irish writer describes such a woman in these words: “She had spent her life doing good to others. You could tell the others by their hunted look.” In short we become patrons – people who, out of our generosity, deign to give a hand up to a person in need.

But becoming patrons is not what these parables are about. These stories are not fundamentally about us. These stories are fundamentally about God. The Pharisees realized this, better than we do. They would have been deeply insulted to think Jesus would have compared them to a lowly shepherd, and, uncomfortable as it is to admit, they wouldn’t have dreamt of being compared to a woman. Jesus isn’t just calling the Pharisees to be a bit more generous – he is calling them to repentance, a complete reversal of their way of seeing and being in the world. The point of these two parables is not for us to identify with the shepherd and the woman. We are not the shepherd: we are the lost sheep. We are not the woman: we are the lost coin. God is the shepherd; God is the searching woman. God is the one who takes the astonishing risk of leaving the ninety-nine sheep and coming to look for us, a journey of danger, daring, and devotion, a journey we could call passion. God is the one who carefully, thoughtfully seeks us out like a woman meticulously and methodically tracking down a lost coin.

What Jesus is saying is, whoever you are, Pharasaic lawmaker or sinful lawbreaker, this is not a story about you. It's a story about God. And the way to allow yourself to become part of the story is to stop running away, to stop hiding from the one who yearns and searches for you.

Few people have understood these parables better than Francis Thompson. Francis Thompson was born into a well-to-do Catholic family in Manchester, England, in 1859. He was sent to a boarding school to prepare him for the priesthood. When it became clear his vocation lay elsewhere he was sent to train, like his father, as a physician. But his studies made him miserable, and, after the death of his mother, he started to take opium. He came to London at the age of 26, and fell into a low life on the streets, facing hunger, disease, and drug addiction. Two years later he was on the verge of suicide, when he was befriended by a prostitute, who took him in, cared for him through the winter, and encouraged him to write poetry. Two astonishing events followed. First, the literary editor Wilfred Meynell published one of Thompson's poems and began a close friendship that was to endure for the rest of Thompson's life. And second, the prostitute, whose name is not known, recognized that Thompson had found a hitherto unknown peace among his new friends, and disappeared from his life. Her last words to him were, "They will not understand our friendship." There is no other word in the Christian vocabulary for the publication of that poem but providence, and there are no other words in the theological lexicon for the ministry of that prostitute but Holy Spirit.

Exactly one hundred years ago, shortly before his death, Thompson wrote a poem in which he recognized that all his life he had been running away, and fundamentally the one he had been running away from was not his own father but God. His own life was secondary to the fundamental narrative, which was God's relentless pursuit of him. The celebrated poem is called *The Hound of Heaven*. It begins, "I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears I hid from Him." In the poem Thompson explains why he was fleeing: he admits, "though I knew his love who followèd, Yet was I sore adread Lest, having him, I must have naught beside." Yet the hound of heaven pursued him with all "deliberate speed". (You might recognize the phrase "all deliberate speed," for it is re-minted in the second Brown v Board Supreme Court judgement on school desegregation in 1955.) In the end the reader of the poem is less fascinated by the reasons and emotions of the one running away, and instead captivated by the persistence, the relentless pursuit and most of all the passion of the hound of heaven, the love that will not let Thompson go. The hound of heaven is one and the same with the woman searching for a lost coin and the shepherd searching for the stray sheep: each one is God in Christ who searches us out and knows us, who comes to us in any form we can receive him, even astonishingly, as for Thompson, in the form of a prostitute, simply because he is the love that will not let us go.

In a few moments we are going to ask God's blessing on our new PathWays Fellows and on those most closely involved in Duke Chapel's attempts to make new friendships in Durham, particularly in the West End and surrounding neighborhoods. As I hinted earlier, if we see today's parables as all about us – if we see ourselves as the shepherd and the woman – then such friendships can't help but be ones of patronage, ones where those who recognize their own social privilege offer to give a hand up to those they see as less fortunate. But we are a people who are learning to read these parables, and much else in the Bible and in life, in a different way. We are not the searchers in these parables: we are the found. God is not the goal of our seeking: God is the hound that tracks us down however hard and fast we are determined to run away. And if we have discovered the joy of being found, how much we long to share that joy with others who have made a similar discovery, who know like us how profoundly they have tried to flee. These new friendships are not ones in which we do the seeking or the finding, but ones in which we experience the joy of being found.

This is a joy perfectly expressed by Vincent Donovan. Fr Donovan was a Roman Catholic priest who became exasperated with conventional forms of Catholic education in Tanzania in the 1960s and received permission from his bishop simply to go out among the Masai tribes and share their life and talk about God. There he discovered how to read these two parables as stories not about us but about God. Initially he wrestled with his own doubts, doubts about how the particular story of Jesus' cross and resurrection translated into the Masai culture all around him. But a Masai elder converted Donovan by contrasting the faith of a western hunter with the faith of an African lion. The Masai elder showed Donovan that his notion of faith was a profoundly western notion. It was merely intellectual assent. "To 'believe' like that was similar to a white hunter shooting an animal

with his gun from a great distance. Only his eyes and his fingers took part in the act.” The Masai elder said “for a [person] really to believe is like a male lion going after its prey. His nose and eyes and ears pick up on the prey. His legs give him the speed to catch it. All the power of his body is involved in the terrible death leap and single blow to the neck with the front paw, the blow that actually kills. And as the animal goes down the lion envelops it in his arms, ... pulls it to itself, and makes it part of himself. This is the way a lion kills. This is the way a [person] believes. This is what faith is.”

Hearing this, Donovan understood for the first time why, when his faith was gone, he ached in every fiber of his being. Faith wasn't intellectual assent: it was a whole body experience, outer senses and inner organs. It mattered all over, and, when it was missing, it hurt all over. But the Masai elder went on, in words that echo today's two parables. Remember we discovered in the first parable we are not the shepherd, we are the sheep. In the second parable we are not the woman we are the coin. Well here's what the Masai elder had to say to Fr Donovan about faith. “You told us of the High God, how we must search for him, even leave our land and our people to find him. But we have not done this. We have not left our land. We have not searched for him. *He has searched for us.* He has searched *us* out and found us. *All the time we think we are the lion. In the end, the lion is God.*”

The lion is God. Here are we, thinking our heartsearchings of faith, our journey, ourselves is what the story is all about. But, brothers and sisters, hear the good news. The story is all about God. The lion is God. God is the hound of heaven who searches us out and knows us, God in Christ is the good shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to come and find us, God in Christ is the woman who cared so much that she set everything aside to find us, her oh-so precious lost coin. Faith is not a heroic journey: faith is the acceptance of being found.

Francis Thompson tried to be a priest, and tried to be a physician, and ended up as a vagrant. All of these turned out to be different forms of running away from God. Only when he was able to receive real friendship did he stop running away. Vincent Donovan tried to be a teacher to the Masai, but only when he went out among their tribes did he discover what faith really was. When we commission our PathWays fellows in a few moments' time, we're sending them to the West End of Durham to find out who the God that is searching for them really is, and to stop running away. And we pray that there they will make new friends, friends who have discovered, like them, that we are not the lion. The lion is God.