

Sermon on Matthew 18.15-20

Every so often, outside my window I hear a beeping of a car horn and a cacophony of baas and bleetings and I realise that my neighbour is moving his sheep to new pastures further down the hill.

It really is a sight to behold.

Everything else stops whilst I admire the skill of the farmers gathering up what seems like a 100 sheep, all of whom want to do their own thing but are somehow skilfully and safely shepherded down to their new home in a field down the hill.

There was one morning when I had been watching all this through my window and saw them all disappear out of sight down the hill, when I noticed in the far corner of the car park a lone sheep on its own. Its bleeting unheard by the farmer. It was limping and hadn't been able to keep up with its fellow sheep. It slowly hobbled across the car park and my heart went out to it. I dashed downstairs determined to try, in some way to get it back to a place of safety with the rest of the flock.

Why am I telling you about lost sheep you may be wondering?

Well just 2 verses before our passage from Matthew, Jesus teaches about the lost sheep and how the shepherd leaves the 99 to go and find the 1 lost sheep.

He then goes on to teach about resolving conflicts with our fellow sheep/ neighbours/ family/ colleagues/ church members.

This passage is a template for not only living together as a church family but also how we live together as a child of God as part of the family of God in the world.

Our faith is not a private matter.

If it informs our lives it will also involve other people. When two or three or more... are gathered together Jesus promises to be with us.

Jesus lets the disciples know that they need each other. They are to care for and support each other like a family.

When families work right, they are God's way of teaching us important things, like how to share and how to work together and how to take care of one another.

A healthy family has a way of smoothing out rough edges by making us rub up against each other, like tumbling pebbles in a jar.

Living with other people, we learn that we cannot have everything our own way. We learn to compromise, giving up some of the things we want so that other people can have some of the things they want, and while it is never easy, learning this give and take is part of learning how to be fully human.

Another thing about living in a family can teach you is how to fight, especially if you have brothers or sisters to practice on.

I grew up with a brother who was just a year younger than me. As children we argued, we slammed doors and physically came to blows on more than one occasion. Yes we knew how to fight but we also learned how to make up, forgiving each other for the mean things we said or did sometimes.

However not everyone has the same memories of growing up because many families do *not* work right.

They are not schools in forbearance and forgiveness but reformatories where rules are more important than people and where the first rule is silence, silence about anything unpleasant or untoward.

If you cannot say something nice do not say anything at all, and if you have a problem with someone, keep it to yourself, because harmony— even the *illusion* of harmony— is the most important thing, more important than telling the truth, more important than your feelings and more important, finally, than you.

That is the lesson many families teach and it is a crying shame, but in our reading from Matthew, Jesus teaches his disciples that they need to example another way of living together.

The example of the shepherd leaving the 99 sheep to look for the one lost sheep teaches us that in God's family, at times a family of very wayward sheep, we all have a place and are valued and respected around the family table.

We are encouraged to grow our churches to increase the numbers on our 'books' but if we get caught up in the big ideas we can easily loose sight of individuals with their own needs and personalities.

Individuals with their own voices. Yes, hopefully singing from the same hymn sheet but also valued as an individual adding to the music with our own tone of voice.

And it's when there is disharmony, it's how we treat each other when emotions run high and tempers are short that will reflect how we honour God.

During a baptism service I light a candle from the light of the Paschal Candle and hand it to the parents of the child who is being baptised as a symbol to remind them and us that we take our light from the one true light in Christ.

And at the start of every service I also light a candle to remind us that we are all one in Christ. That the one light is the same light within all of us.

Though we will disagree over many things with our neighbour it is important to be able to disagree respectfully. To disagree well.

We are not called to all think the same but to treat each other in a way that honours God within us all. Jesus calls for us to learn to disagree in ways that build up rather than tear down.

We could make the case that the church has suffered from not thinking big enough and bold enough but here Jesus is also calling on his disciples to think small. To be concerned about the 1 as well as the 99.

We have a pastoral challenge to think small enough to chase down the lost sheep, small enough to respectfully confront each other in private about conflicts and small enough to accept forgiveness for personal transgressions.

In a lot of ways, it is a real nuisance to belong to a family.

It would be much easier if we were just a bunch of individuals, loosely bound by similar beliefs but whose affairs remained an essentially private matter between God and us.

But our life together is the chief means God has chosen for being with us, and it is of ultimate importance to God.

Our life together is the place where we are comforted, confronted, tested, and redeemed by God through one another.

It is the place where we come to know God or to flee from God's presence depending upon how we come to know or flee from one another.

When someone crosses us, we are called to be the first to reach out, even when we are the ones who have been hurt, even when God knows we have done nothing wrong, even when everything in us wants to fight back— still we are called to community with one another, to act like the family we are.

That is how we know God, and God knows us. That is what we are called to do, to confront and make up, to forgive and seek forgiveness, to heal and be healed and to rejoice when the 99 can become 100 again.

That is when the sheep in other fields will come and find out what is all the fuss is about, what is all the rejoicing is about.

Amen.