

This short act of worship has been produced for you by Revd Paul Weary. If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time when you would normally be sharing with others in church - pray for them as they pray for you.

### **Call to worship**

How much does God love us? In our worship today we discover that God is like a shepherd who abandons everything to find the one sheep that was lost. God is like a woman who loses a coin and turns the house upside down in an effort to find it.

### **Opening prayer**

Loving God, I come before you knowing that you invite us, seek us, come to us, and embrace us. I come because as a shepherd seeks a lost sheep, you seek us when we are lost. As a woman searches for a lost coin, you rejoice when we are found. For your patience, love and care, I give you thanks. Amen.

### **Hymn StF 479 The King of love my shepherd is**

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWfZ-8s71-k>

The King of love my shepherd is,  
whose goodness faileth never;  
I nothing lack if I am his  
and he is mine for ever.

Where streams of living water flow  
my ransomed soul he leadeth,  
and where the verdant pastures grow  
with food celestial feedeth.

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,  
but yet in love he sought me,  
and on his shoulder gently laid,  
and home rejoicing brought me.

In death's dark vale I fear no ill  
with thee, dear Lord, beside me;  
thy rod and staff my comfort still,  
thy cross before to guide me.

Thou spread'st a table in my sight;  
thy unction grace bestoweth;  
and O what transport of delight  
from thy pure chalice floweth!

And so through all the length of days  
thy goodness faileth never:  
good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise  
within thy house for ever.

Henry Williams Baker (1821-1877)

### **Prayer of confession**

Shepherding God,  
I am sorry that I have gone wandering off in my own direction.  
Forgive me, find me and hold me safe in your arms.

Shepherding God,  
I am sorry when I have taken you for granted  
and did not stop to say thank you.  
Forgive me when I take your forgiveness for granted.

Shepherding God,  
I am sorry when I have thought only of myself and not of  
others.

Forgive me and teach me your ways,  
so I may care for those around me. Amen.

St Paul writes:

“The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ  
Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” (1 Timothy 1:15)  
Lord, I receive the good news that I am found, forgiven and set  
free!

To you be honour and glory forever and ever! Amen.

### **1 Timothy 1:12-17 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)**

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he considered me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience as an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages,

immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.

**Hymn StF 440 Amazing grace, how sweet the sound**

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ab1wKVh\\_8Wc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ab1wKVh_8Wc)

Amazing grace - how sweet the sound -  
that saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
was blind, but now I see.

God's grace that taught my heart to fear,  
his grace my fears relieved;  
how precious did that grace appear  
the hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares  
I have already come:  
God's grace has brought me safe thus far,  
and grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,  
his word my hope secures;

he will my shield and portion be  
as long as life endures.

And when this flesh and heart shall fail  
and mortal life shall cease,  
I shall possess within the veil  
a life of joy and peace.

When we've been there ten thousand years  
bright shining as the sun,  
we've no less days to sing God's praise  
than when we've first begun.

John Newton (1725-1806) *alt.*

**Luke 15:1-10 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost

until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

### **Sermon: 'Lost and found'**

The theme for today is 'lost and found'. Our Gospel passage gives two examples of things being lost and found. In the first a woman loses a coin. In the other story a shepherd loses a sheep.

Have you ever had the experience of losing something, perhaps something very precious, and then finding it? Do you remember how you felt at the time?

People lose things all the time. One of the places they end up is the TFL Lost Property Office. Every year over 300,000 items of property are left on London's transport network? This includes 150 mobile phones lost every day.

Apparently some very strange items have passed through the Lost Property Office over the years, including: a puffer fish (presumably stuffed, not alive), a judge's wig, a 14 foot long boat, a park bench, enough musical instruments to start an orchestra, an envelope containing £15,000 and even a kitchen sink. (I must admit I once left a guitar on the 17 bus, but soon realised I had forgotten it, and it was kept safely for me at the bus garage until I could collect it.)

Of course, there are things we lose that we don't worry about. Most of us, if we dropped a penny on the floor, wouldn't even bother picking it up. It has so little value it's hardly worth the trouble. But lose something precious and it really matters. We turn everything upside down until we find it. We don't give up until it's safely back in our possession!

I guess that all of us have lost something or other at some point in life. Maybe we've even been lost ourselves! So when Jesus told these stories it was something that everyone in his audience could relate to. We can imagine being in the situation

of the woman who has lost a coin or the shepherd who has lost a sheep because we've been in that kind of situation too.

Luke tells us that Jesus was responding to the complaints of a strict religious group called the Pharisees. The Pharisees believed that they could keep themselves and their religion pure by being exclusive and shutting out anyone they thought of as a sinner. As far as they were concerned, anyone who claimed to live a godly and righteous life should do the same. But Jesus confounded them by doing just the opposite! He welcomed sinners and ate with them. The Pharisees were not happy.

In reply Jesus told the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin. (He also told the story of a lost son – the 'Prodigal Son', but that takes us beyond today's reading.)

The parables tell us three things about God.

First - they tell us **God is a loving God.**

A man called Norman remembers getting separated from his family on a train journey when he was just nine years old. He had fallen asleep on the way home, and when he woke up at the end of the line he discovered he was all alone. He got off the train and after a long walk, by trial and error, eventually found himself on familiar ground. By now it was dark, so can

you imagine how happy he was that he knew the way. Norman tells the story:

"I sprinted the last few blocks home, envisioning the hero's welcome I would receive: the cries of joy at my safe return; the trip to the police station to call off the search; the warm hugs; the delicious dinner; the gentle kiss good night.

I bursted through the front door and skidded to a halt in the kitchen, where the adults were talking and drinking. My mother turned from the sink, took one look at me, and said, "I told you kids it was time for bed! How did you get so filthy? Clean yourself up right this minute!" I was stunned. They didn't know I'd been lost. They had left the train, gotten on and off the bus, walked several blocks, and eaten the evening meal, and in all that time no one had said, "Where's Norman?"

The first point of these parables, is that the lost sheep and the lost coin were valued and were missed. I wonder whether we sometimes picture God as being like Norman's parents, not knowing or caring if we are lost. That was the attitude of the Pharisees. Sinners don't count – God isn't interested in the likes of them and neither are we. But the point is that God *does* know and God *does* care.

It was only one sheep out of ninety-nine, much the same as the rest, in fact probably even more daft and weaker than the rest,

which is probably why it got lost in the first place. The widow's coin was of little worldly worth. But it is likely to have been given to her as part of her dowry on her wedding day. To those who had lost them, they were of great value.

The point is that whether we are a Pharisee, a sinner, a lost sheep or a lost coin, God, for whatever reason, considers that we are worth finding. Despite our bickering, our brokenness, our self-righteousness, God still considers that we are worth finding. In God's eyes everyone is of value and worthy of his care and concern. God is a loving God.

Second - the stories tell us that **God is a searching God**.

In the stories huge efforts are expended in the search: the shepherd takes a risk by temporarily abandoning the other ninety-nine in the wilderness and when he finds the stray "he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices." The woman lights a lamp and takes a broom in hand in her attempt to recover her missing coin. Neither the shepherd nor the woman has a moment's hesitation as to what to do: neither gives up until what was lost is found.

Now any shepherd in Jesus' day would have told you that the behaviour of the shepherd in the parable is absurd. Sheep are stupid. If they get lost and isolated they just lie down and give

up. The absurdity is that no shepherd would leave ninety-nine sheep unattended in the wilderness to hunt for one who is lost. What do you think would happen to the ninety-nine left behind? That's what's so amazing about God's love: God goes to absurd and foolish lengths to find those who are lost.

Bishop William Willimon comments:

"We all want this to be so easy. I'm lost, God finds me, I'm saved. But look at the effort God puts into finding us. God searches until we are found, not as long as it is convenient, as long as there's hope (thank goodness God kept searching for me!), as long as God can see some benefit in the searching, etc. The problem is, we want quick, easy answers. We expect church programmes and ministries to have immediate results. We want salvation to be quick and grace to be easy. It isn't, of course. It wasn't for God, as the costliness of the cross reminds us.

In fact, we have to "keep on keeping on". If God is willing to search for us until we are found, why can't we keep pursuing our ministries (whatever they are) without expecting immediate response or gratification?"

God is first a loving God, second a searching God, and third **God is a celebrating God**.

There is a wonderful feeling of joy and celebration running right through the 15th chapter of Luke's gospel. The shepherd finds his lost sheep and he rejoices. The woman finds her lost coin and she rejoices. And if we had continued reading, a father finds his lost, prodigal son and he rejoices.

In fact, so overcome are they that they each call their friends and neighbours to come and party. No one wants to celebrate alone. Now it may well be that the expense of the entertainment may be more than the value of either the sheep or coin, but that only emphasises the extravagance and joy of the occasion. Can you imagine losing something valuable – let's say a diamond engagement ring? I'm sure if you found it you would be greatly relieved. You might even tell your friends and post about it on Facebook and Twitter, but would you call everybody up and invite them round for a party?

But that's what the shepherd and the widow do. And that's what God does! It's an unusual and unexpected picture of God – God throwing a party, which even the angels dare not miss. It's an image to hold in mind if we normally think of God as a stern master or vindictive judge. Yes, it's true that in the moral to each story Jesus makes a point of speaking of heaven's joy over one sinner who repents. But these stories are not primarily calls to repentance. After all, sheep and coins can't

repent. The emphasis is on the searching and the celebration and the unforgettable picture of a merciful and joyful God.

You want a word for it? The word is grace. It's the word Paul uses in our first Bible reading as he remembers a time when he too was completely lost. In wonder he writes: "the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."

It's the same word that we sang in our last hymn: "amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." It was written by John Newton, the former slave ship captain who became a leading abolitionist and a minister in the Church of England. "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."

That's grace, and if I was asked to choose just one chapter in the whole of the bible which illustrates what the gospel of Jesus Christ is about, it would be this one, with its wonderful picture of a loving, searching, celebrating God.

Consider something valuable to you that was lost but was found. Remember the joy of the finding. Jesus invites us to share with God in celebration as those who were once lost, without meaning and purpose to life, are found. To those like the Pharisees who are offended by the remarkable generosity



of God's grace, Jesus' words come as a challenge to repent and change. But to those who have ever felt remote and far from God, Jesus brings good news: God loves us and seeks us out and brings us home.

### **Prayers for others and ourselves**

God who searches for the lost,  
we pray for those  
who are like the sheep or coin,  
who have gone their own way,  
who have got into trouble with the police,  
or who have run up debts  
or become dependent on drugs or alcohol:  
Help us to search for others who are lost.

We pray for those  
who are like the tax collectors and sinners:  
who have discovered Christ in their own way,  
but maybe don't fit  
into society or church structures  
or conform to our expectations.  
Help us to rejoice with all who welcome Christ.

We pray for those  
who are like the Pharisees and scribes in Jesus' story:  
those who think they know how church should be,

who like order and who need to feel safe and secure  
trying hard to keep church respectable.  
Help us to embrace challenge and change.

We pray for those  
who are like the shepherd or woman  
worried about their security and the future,  
driven to reach out and care for others,  
to search out those who are lost  
or sometimes tired out from caring.  
Help us to reach out and care for others and find rest.  
Amen.

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,



and the glory are yours  
now and for ever.  
Amen.

**Hymn StF 323 I will sing the wondrous story**

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QZo56woLsA>

I will sing the wondrous story  
of the Christ who died for me,  
how he left the realms of glory  
for the cross on Calvary.

Refrain:

*Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story  
of the Christ who died for me,  
sing it with the saints in glory,  
gathered by the crystal sea.*

I was lost: but Jesus found me,  
found the sheep that went astray,  
raised me up and gently led me  
back into the narrow way.

He will keep me till the river  
rolls its waters at my feet:  
then he'll bear me safely over,  
where the loved ones I shall meet.

Francis H. Rowley (1854-1952)

Acknowledgements

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