

Year C, Creation 2 (Proper 24). 14th September 2025

Exodus 32: 7-14, 1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

Finding our way back

Our gospel reading today has that well-known story of the lost sheep, one in a hundred, who was lost and yet is searched out and brought back to a place of safety, back with the other 99 in in the flock.

I have often puzzled how the sheep got lost in the first place but if you sit quietly observing sheep you may understand why. I have observed a sheep with its head down munching the grass, and slowly, almost imperceptibly, it was moving away from the rest of the sheep in the field. With its head down, focussed on finding the tastiest bits of grass and other plants, inch by inch, or should I be saying centimetre by centimetre, it moved away from the others.

I am sure it didn't intend to put some distance between itself and the rest, but munch by munch, mouthful by mouthful it did. It eventually was out of sight of the other sheep and after a considerable time it did lift up its head and with what seemed like a bleat of alarm, called out to the flock. Several bleats were made in response, and the sheep turned back towards the flock and re-joined them.

This pastoral scene may tell us quite a lot about our lives and the climate emergency. Most of us have been busy living our lives, focussing on jobs, raising a family, rubbing along with the cultural and societal norms of our times. We never intended to get 'ecologically lost', to consume goods, create waste including the horrifically large Great North Pacific Garbage Patch (yes it has an official name), emit greenhouse gases in quantities that would damage the beauty of God's creation. But we did, some perhaps more than others. We did it, munch by munch, mouthful by mouthful just like the sheep. Or maybe mile by mile in our daily car trips and in our holiday flights, in the unseasonal foods we ate, in the fuel we burnt to keep us warm in badly insulated houses...

None of us did this on purpose, and yet collectively we find ourselves in a country that has one of the top ten levels of greenhouse gas emissions per capita in the world. The UK per capita greenhouse gas emissions is in the region of 12.7 tonnes of CO₂e, when we account for the carbon emissions of products

made overseas that we import. 12.7 tonnes is a major improvement over the last 25 years¹, but still above the level of sustainability for the world.

And yet, like that sheep on Iona, when we lift our head and take stock of our surroundings, we recognise that we are in one sense 'lost'. We know that God's beautiful creation has been sullied and seriously compromised by the activities of humankind, especially since the Industrial Revolution.

In the parable, the shepherd successfully seeks out the lost sheep, and it is carried back to rejoin the flock who have not strayed from the shepherd. Are we ready to be sought out, by our good shepherd, and like the sheep, be humble and willing to be shown the way back to rejoin those who have not harmed God's awe-inspiring, beautiful creation?

I wonder what the conversation would be like with our good shepherd, as we are carried from our lost place back into the safe fold in the loving arms of Christ? Would we be given the knowledge and told the story of how we got ecologically lost, by a loving caring shepherd? What transformation would we have undergone on that journey?

In the first letter of Paul to Timothy, Paul admits to how he was lost and the transforming power of his relationship with Christ. Paul made such a massive transformation, and admits to it in his letter to Timothy. Paul acted in ignorance, but once he came to know the grace and love found in Christ Jesus he was transformed. God's mercy enabled him to become the evangelist to the gentiles.

In today's world, when we look at all the many ways in which we are invited to buy solutions that will reduce our own greenhouse gas emissions, who are we to trust? What is our own personal path that Christ is inviting us to take – maybe not carrying us like the sheep, but showing us the path back to sustainable living and repairing God's beautiful creation?

¹ The UK produces a fraction of annual global carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions per annum, less than 1%, though it has a significant history of high emissions due to the Industrial Revolution and remains a top historical emitter. However, the UK has dramatically reduced its emissions since 1990, showing a faster percentage reduction than many other nations. In 2020, the UK's total GHG emissions were 2,540 million tonnes of CO₂e, with CO₂ emissions at 400 megatonnes. The UK emissions now match those of about the 1850's as emissions started rising from 1 tonne per person in 1750, for a much smaller population of c. 6.75 million. Since 1750 the UK has emitted about 80 billion tonnes of CO₂. Data from <https://ourworldindata.org/co2/country/united-kingdom#per-capita-how-much-co2-does-the-average-person-emit>

You may be aware that the Rectory at St James' is being wrapped in two layers of thermal insulation, and will bring the Rectory up to an excellent standard, matching modern building standards. That will reduce the CO₂ emissions from the Rectory, contributing to our Net Zero efforts. Also, as an additional benefit it will make for a much more attractive Rectory for the next incumbent and make recruitment of a Rector easier.

The lost sheep was returned to the flock and it was a source of joy. There was no sense of guilt or punishment for the sheep that strayed. There is hope in all the small steps as well as the larger steps that bring us back into right relationship with God and God's creation. How might the good shepherd be speaking to each one of us and guiding us back into right relationship with God and God's creation?