

Teaching: Winter-Spring 2021



The theme for the coming term will be to explore what it means to 'leave the ninety-nine'. We will look at what this tells us about the heart (motivation) of God and the mission of God. We will explore welcome – who is welcome and what does welcome actually mean? We will look at examples of how Jesus engages with 'the least, the last and the lost'.

Sunday 8th March, 2021

1. Reading: Matthew 18:1-14

At that time, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'

2 He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. 3 And he said: 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

6 'If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung round their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. 7 Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come! 8 If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

10 'See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

12 'What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? 13 And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander

off. 14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

2. Questions:

- i. In this passage, the use of the illustration of the shepherd leaving the many in search of the lost applies to the ministry of Jesus to the lost people of Israel and to the disciples first call to go to the
- ii. What does Jesus' illustration of the child, the person of the lowest status in Jewish society, say to us in regard to our attitude as disciples of Jesus? In what ways do we fail to act on Jesus' call for humility and why do we so readily fail in these ways? What do we recognise in ourselves that needs to change?
- iii. How does Jesus' illustration of the child, speak to us about status in the church?
- iv. Jesus warns the disciples that causing any of his followers to stumble has serious consequences. How seriously do we take this warning? Why was Jesus so strong on this issue?
- v. We are called to become like Jesus (2 Corinthians 3:18), for Christlikeness to be formed in us requiring our willingness to surrender to God and by the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Discuss how that has happened in your life and what is happening today, are we aware of the work of transformation that God is continuing to do in us? Are we surrendering to that process or resisting?

3. Prayer

- Jesus' illustration of humility and servant heartedness that should mark his followers is a deep personal challenge. As you have shared and discussed you may have identified times in your life when you have not acted appropriately and caused harm to others and to yourself. Take a moment of quiet to reflect and pray, to repent of past behaviours and receive God's forgiveness. If you have been able to share anything like this with others and are willing to receive prayer, allow others in the group to pray over you.
- Pray for those who are vulnerable. Those who seek to follow Jesus but are led astray by the behaviour of others towards them.
- Pray for those most vulnerable in our society, for children, the isolated and lonely, for the homeless, for those who face prejudice of any form, and others whom the Lord places on your heart (in UK and around the world).
- Praise to God for the Kingdom of Heaven to come on earth! Pray for the witness of our lives to reflect the ways of the kingdom and for the witness of the church in the world.

4. Text of the Sermon:

Little Ones and Big Ones

In the first message of this series entitled '**Leave the 99**' we looked at Jesus illustration of the shepherd leaving his flock to go off in search of a lost sheep as recorded in Luke's gospel. The 99 are left safely in the field, (there would have been other shepherds on the hillside taking care of their flocks who would have overseen them), and he goes after the one that has strayed, lost its way. Here we see the same illustration used in Matthew's gospel but in a slightly different way.

In the story recorded by Luke we gain an understanding of God's mission heart to seek out all who are lost, all. God's love for all people and his desire for relationship, with all people everywhere, then and now. God's remarkable invitation and welcome extended to all. All are made in the image of God and deserving of His love. We might find it difficult to offer that invitation without exception, but that is where we need to be changed to be in line with God's lavish, gracious welcome.

You may remember that the story of the lost sheep in Luke is given after Jesus is accused of spending his time with the 'tax collectors and sinners'. Jesus did so openly and on many occasions. This group of people who abuse the systems for personal gain, willfully sinning and yet Jesus goes to them, eating with them, he is described as being their friend. The Pharisees shocked at this behaviour of a Rabbi said of Jesus, *'This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.'* (Luke 15: 1) And immediately following the illustration of the lost sheep Jesus speaks of the Lost Coin and the Lost Son, of the sheer joy of finding the one who was lost.

'The lost' in Jesus use of the same illustration here in Matthew's gospel is a more specific group. The lost are those who have come to know the truth about God as revealed in Jesus, God's Son, and yet have fallen away either willfully or been led astray by others, and Jesus speaks very strongly about the consequences upon those who are responsible for leading his follower astray. Vs 6 *'If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung round their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.*

Jesus comes to his own people, 'the people of God' whom God has journeyed with over hundreds of years, providing for them, protecting them, leading and guiding them, teaching them through the Law of God, gradually revealing himself to them And in Jesus He reveals the fulness of himself to them.

In Colossians 1: 19 we read, *For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, [Jesus] and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.* This is the gospel. God's reconciling work of salvation through His Son, his death and resurrection for all people.

Of course, the mission of God is to all people everywhere but Jesus was called to go to the lost people of Israel, to God's people.

John speaks of Jesus calling at the beginning of his gospel account; *He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.* In Matthew in chapter 15:24 Jesus says to his disciples *'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.* And in Matthew 10: 5-7 when Jesus sends out the 12 he says them *'Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. 6 Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. 7 As you go, proclaim this message: "The kingdom of heaven has come near."*

Of course, the commission that Jesus gives to his disciples at the end of his ministry begins in Jerusalem and then extends out to the wider regions surrounding Jerusalem and then to all the nations of the earth.

So, Jesus is speaking to his disciples and he is speaking about those who believe in Him.

They come to him with this Big Question. *'Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'*

It's a human question isn't it? Jesus has called these 12 ordinary men to follow him, to leave everything that they had before and to learn from Him, the Rabbi Jesus. Jesus has told them that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, and they can be part of it. But how big a part and what is this Kingdom? They are of course trying to work all of this out. They ask a question that is important to them because their experience of a Kingdom is of an earthly Kingdom with positions of power and authority that enable the Kingdom to function. Someone must be in charge, there will be senior roles with power, responsibility, privilege and benefits and they want to know what roles they will have within it.

Mark (9:34) tells us that *'...they had argued about who was the greatest'*. Luke also (9:46 and again in 22:24) *'An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest'*. It was an ongoing issue for them.

Even *'...the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons...Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.'* Matthew 20:21

Jesus brings a child before them. The illustration of the child is the way that Jesus is going to answer their question. How must they have felt? How confused were they now?

He tells them *'...unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'* You can perhaps imagine their confusion at this point. Really, you want us to become like children? What do you mean?

Of course, he is gently telling them they have got it wrong! The Kingdom of God is not built upon the same values and structures of the kingdoms of the earth. The Kingdom of God is very different, it is quite unlike anything that they are imagining.

As the child stands in front of them, he says; *'...whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.'* In other translations, *'whoever becomes humble' like this child welcomes me.'*

Now, we might at this point have the image of Jesus and children that is depicted in Luke 18 where the disciples get annoyed that the people are bringing their babies and children to Jesus for him to place his hand on them, to bless them. There is no doubt that Jesus values the children, he affirms them when he says; *'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.'* So whilst Jesus point is different here, it takes nothing away from his love of children and how they should be valued.

In Jewish society children have the lowest place, subject to the authority of their elders, to be cared for but not looked up to. And Jesus isn't saying that the behaviour or characteristics of the child is

their redeeming feature, sometimes obedient sometimes not, innocent and trusting, No, **it is their status**, their lowly and humble position in society that is the point.

And Jesus says that this is how it should be amongst you, my disciples, in the Kingdom of Heaven. He turns their thinking upside down. He challenges them to make a paradigm shift from the ways of the earth to the ways of heaven. From the competitive power dominant, aspirations of the individual and the survival of the fittest to a place where every person is valued equally, where there is no place for some to lord power over others. All are to be respected, loved and cared for. The description of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth that Jesus is speaking of is the community of God's people, saved by His mercy and grace, loving one another because Christ has loved them, recognizing, valuing one another and benefitting from the gifts that God has given to each person as they follow Jesus in the world.

Jesus is saying two things.

- **Firstly**, knowing the weakness of the human heart and of the disciples attitude to view the Kingdom of God as they view the Kingdoms of earth, he tells them that greatness in the Kingdom of God is seen in **Humility**. Later in Matthew 20:25-28 *'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'*
- **Secondly**, Jesus is saying that there are those who are vulnerable, like the child or as he later refers to them as the 'Little Ones', in the Kingdom, who need to be cared for and helped. Woe to those who cause anyone to stumble. In Vs 6-10 he gives a clear warning against earthly values causing hurt and pain to the vulnerable in the Kingdom of God. We can care and we can harm.

Do not despise them. They are protected. *'See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.'*

Jesus is speaking to those who would believe in Him. This teaching applies to us today.

Let's return to the disciples question *'who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?'*. What does Jesus ask them to do? *'...unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, whoever takes the lowly (or humble) position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

We need to change, we need to be Humble, we need a Servant attitude.

- we are made humble by the wonderful life transforming works of Jesus on the cross for us. We are saved by grace not by works.
- And we are to be disciples of Jesus who live humbly. He is our example.

Philippians 2:5-8

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

- ⁶ *who, being in very nature^[a] God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;*
- ⁷ *rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*
- ⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross*

Of course, Jesus had a unique task, but we are called to Christlikeness and to be transformed by his grace at work within us to become like him.

2 Corinthians 3:18 *And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

It is the Holy Spirit who will bring about the transformation and change, only God can do this, but he needs us to humble ourselves and welcome the Holy Spirit to do His work within us, he is gentle, he won't force his way in. He needs to be invited.

How do we think of ourselves this morning? Are we willing to humble ourselves each and everyday as we seek to follow the light that is Jesus?

Apostle Paul to the Romans 12 suggested the attitude that followers of Jesus should have; '**... do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.**'

Finally, if we live the way that Jesus describes we will build the community of faith, his church. The community of God's people, interdependent, loving of one another following Jesus together, carrying one another's burdens and reaching out in love to the world. And the church will bear witness to Jesus and be good news to the world.