

## THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY 2016

“Then drew near all the Publicans and sinners for to hear him...”

I have mentioned before that my first parish included Onion Lake First Nation, a large Cree community that straddles the Saskatchewan-Alberta border. The congregation was small even though the population of the community was relatively large by First Nations standards – some four or five thousand people living on small acreages, with one small strip mall at the west end of town and a gas station on the east side, opposite the Anglican Church. With so few people in the congregation we struggled musically most of the time (at least until Daniel Watson joined the congregation for the better part of a year). We regularly rotated through a standard set of six or seven hymns all of which were easy enough to sing – Jesus loves me, This little light of mine, What a friend we have in Jesus... . Among the best known hymns was one that became very dear to me. I am certain that I have mentioned it before. I still hear it in the community’s slow, country style of hymn-singing: “When he cometh, when he cometh,” the hymn goes, “to make up his jewels, all his jewels, precious jewels, his loved and his own ... He will gather, he will gather, the gems for his Kingdom, all the pure ones, all the bright ones, his loved and his own... . Like the stars of the morning his brightness adorning, they shall shine in their beauty bright gems for his crown ... .” It is a wonderfully apocalyptic children’s hymn – very much about the final gathering of all things to God. “When he cometh, when he cometh ... he will gather, he will gather... .”

I begin our reflections with this old children's hymn because the gathering up of jewels is not so far removed from the gathering of sheep and of lost coins in this morning's Gospel lesson for the Third Sunday after Trinity. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin are the first two parts of a three-part series of lost things being found in the fifteenth chapter of St Luke's Gospel. First there is the story of the sheep lost in the wilderness and brought home on the Shepherd's shoulders; then there is the story of the lost coin for which a woman searches by candlelight. These two parables conclude with the most famous parable of all (which we have not read today) – the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Last year we saw that the meaning of these parables is in one sense plain. In the parable of the Lost Sheep, for example, we are the sheep whom Christ the Good Shepherd seeks. As Psalm 23 says: The Lord is my Shepherd. He seeks us not only in life, but most especially in the "wilderness" of death – deaths spiritual and deaths bodily. In the parable of the lost coin, the woman is an image of the Church, the bride of Christ, who seeks her treasure in the dark by the light of the Gospel. We are the coins – the jewels of the Kingdom stamped with the image of God, just as our currency is stamped with the likeness of the Queen. Taken together, the parables describe Christ's search for those lost in the world's darkness and its shadows. This is a cosmic activity, of course, for ultimately all things must be gathered to the One by whom all things are made. He will gather, he will gather, as the song has it, his loved and his own. In one way or another, I think, all of this is clear this morning. Less clear, perhaps, is the apparent contradiction at the very heart of the Gospel. On the one hand, the parables make clear that the lost sheep and coin must be found and carried home. The sheep cannot make its way back to the fold on its own; the coin is inert, it

can do nothing to return itself to the woman. And yet on the other hand Jesus suggests that the sheep and the coin are images of repentance – that is, they are images of what for all the world seems to be an activity that souls must do for themselves. “There shall be more joy over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who need no repentance.” Repentance *seems* to be something that *we* do – we confess our sins, we feel contrition, we turn our hearts to God. But the point of the parables this morning is to remind us that repentance (the very activity that seems for all the world to be our own) is in fact God’s work in us. What this means is that our contrition, our confession, the turning of our hearts to God in thanksgiving, in desperation, I hope – all of these turnings are God’s gift in us. They are what it feels like to be found by God and carried home.

This is all illustrated for us in the very first words of the Gospel this morning: “Then drew near all the Publicans and sinners for to hear him... .” It seems as if the crowds have found Jesus, as if they have decided that he is worth listening to, just as it would seem that we have all decided to gather this morning to hear the word of the Lord. But the spiritual reality that Jesus articulates in the parable, is that *they* are the ones who have been found; his Word is drawing them home; their seeking is his work in them.

It is a wonderful and liberating thing to be told that God seeks us in order to carry us home to himself – that the initiative is on his side and not on ours. This was made clear just last Sunday when we read the parable of the wedding feast. The master of the Feast sent out his servants to bring in the halt and the lame, the poor and the blind – precisely those who could not come

to the Feast on their own. They were found; they were carried. As the children's hymn has it: "When he cometh, when he cometh ... he will gather, he will gather." But the Epistle lesson this morning reminds us that to be gathered requires of us humility – humble yourselves, writes Peter, under the mighty hand of God. That is, we must consent to being found and being carried. This is no easy thing – indeed, just last Sunday in the Gospel lesson, people came up with many reasons not to come to the wedding feast; not to be found, as it were. For some souls it is a painful thing to be told that the one place worth getting to is the one place that they cannot get to on their own. And so the Church offers us a practical exhortation this morning to help cultivate humility: "All of you be subject one to another," writes Peter. That is, be subject as one who serves their neighbour but also, crucially, be subject as one who accepts *to be served* by one's neighbour. We *must* be found or be lost altogether.

Repentance is the work of God in all creation, converting it and calling it back to communion with himself. Humility is simply the grace to know that we must be carried or we shall be lost altogether – the grace to love this and not resent it. Being subject to each other – to love this and not resent it, this is the road to cultivating humble hearts. We sang the hymn over and over in Onion Lake: When he cometh, when he cometh ... he will gather, he will gather. Whatever else we may be, we are his jewels, and so we pray today that like the crowds in the gospel that drew near to hear him, so too we shall draw near only to discover that what seemed for all the world to be our effort, our seeking, is in fact his gracious work in us and the sign of his abiding presence. "Then drew near all the Publicans and sinners for to hear him... ." AMEN.