Luke 15: 1-10
1Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. **2**And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”
**3**So he told them this parable: **4**“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? **5**And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. **6**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.’ **7**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.
**8**“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? **9**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.’ **10**Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Luke 15, with its moving parables of the lost sheep, and the lost coin, develop a theme for repentance. Furthermore, Jesus’ healings became an occasion for conflict with the religious authorities, who were adamantly opposed to deeds of mercy on the Sabbath. In response to the constant grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus offered these interesting stories of mercy, and of the joy of God when the lost are found.

So, what do these two stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin tell us. The first and most obvious element to both parables is the compassionate concern of God. We can see that Jesus suggested to us an attendance to the assistance the marginalised and weak, where we can. The details heightened the intensity of his growing band of enemies who had what they believed to be a legitimate concern over Jesus welcoming to sinners like the tax collectors.

But why, when everybody pays taxes these days, why were these particular tax collectors so reviled? They say the only two certainties in life are taxes and death. But the situation here was different. Israel was a land under stern occupation by the Romans, and they sent tax collectors to raise funds to sustain the Roman empire.

As these tax collectors were usually appointed from the ranks of the Jewish people, they were reviled by the rest of the Jews.

These days I guess we could class as contemporary sinners people such as drug dealers, pimps, porn peddlers, muggers, thieves, traffickers, criminal gangs, and swindlers. Where does this list end? We further could further include tax cheaters, computer hackers, con artists, crooked politicians, and greedy reckless bankers. These are the kinds of people who threaten and hurt the rest of us, who often manage to walk away from crimes and misdeeds, and who leave the rest of us frustrated, angry and often feeling vindictive.

Making it clear that such lifestyles are socially and morally unacceptable is a fundamental necessity in any human community and a feature of most major religious and moral tradition. Our anger and frustration at such people, our demands of moral and legal accountability, and our concern to maintain moral values and social order, are fully justified.

But we need to appreciate the point of Jesus’ message and its transformative power. The narrator makes a point of speaking of Heaven’s joy over a sinner who repents. Here we have an image of a merciful and joyful God who completely overshadows any interest in the behaviour and remorse of such lost creatures. Though ending with celebrations, text of joy did not begin with a party and celebration.

It began by the Jewish authorities criticising Jesus for hosting outcasts. They were insisting that he choose between them and the outcast. To answer this charge that he had overstepped the boundaries by having fellowship with sinners, Jesus maintained that he had not come to call the righteous around him, but rather the sinners to repentance. The two parables Jesus uses make it absolutely clear that he would rather seek out the one lost and attempt to heal them, than stay with the safe majority.

Was Jesus being naïve with these two beautiful tales about the universal human experience of finding something lost, finding something that means a lot? Was he being sentimental, or even amoral in his willingness to welcome these disreputable characters like tax collectors into his fellowship, whatever their sins. To be sure, it is a beautiful thing to see the marginal and condemned of society come in from the cold and join the mainstream fellowship. However, it is naïve, to give such people a free ride and romanticise them as lost sheep, if there is not a shred of evidence that they are remorseful, repentant, and willing to accept responsibility for their actions. Are they ready to amend their lifestyles. Indeed, we can ask, was Jesus sentimentalising them as victims? Is such an unconditional acceptance ignoring something essential and fundamental to moral life, namely, the need to take responsibility

for one’s actions as a condition of acceptable participation in the human community?

Jesus, however, evidently saw in them what we fail to see. We need to be careful that in our anxiety about maintaining social order and shoring up our own social respectability and acceptance in our society, that such we fail to see these sinners as first and foremost children of God. The stray sheep, the lost coin, which are worth our attention, and our effort to help them be found.

We must learn not to moralise and condemn but rather welcome the possibility of genuine repentance and a change of life. Being genuinely gracious and welcoming does not mean giving up our social and moral standards. We can welcome repentant sinners without sacrificing our own desire for security, and respectability. Jesus was clearly free from these anxious needs, and he was free to regard these tax-collectors and sinners as human beings and God’s children, and accept them on that basis, whatever their failure. Now, this is not to sentimentalise them, to diminish their need for repentance, or to deny the importance of moral decency and behaviour. It is to acknowledge them as a lost and endangered sheep, a lost and valuable coin, found at last in a dark corner with the hope that these people can as a result of being found, re-join the community they had left.

The whole point of this reading is that, to see persons in this way and to welcome them is not unrealistic, naïve, sentimental, or immoral; nor is it to deny the necessary social task of justice. It is rather to love realistically when what was feared lost has been found. What is fundamental to all moral order is not coercive power, not the intimidating power of fear and guilt, but the joy of love that is freely given and received with the potential for behaviour change as a result.

Amen