

## Sermon for Third after Trinity, 2021

Jeremiah 31:10-12. Ephesians 2:11-18. Psalm 119:169-end.  
Luke 15:1-10.

**The Collect:** Lord, we beseech thee, let thy continual pity cleanse and defend thy Church; and, because it cannot continue in safety without thy succour, preserve it evermore by thy help and goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

(Luke 15:7) Jesus said: ‘Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repenteth than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.’

Come on, make an effort! That’s an expression we might be familiar with; indeed the more so if we are lazy by disposition. I know people who seem to have been born lazy, and some who make one feel tired watching them beavering away from dawn ’til dusk. There are times too when one is unwell and unable to shift oneself, even though things need to be done and we want to be able to do them. Physical energy may be depleted, and likewise mental energy. The fact of being emotionally low inhibits the brain from producing chemical stimulants needed to ‘get up and go’. So, we can have a vicious cycle of physical and psychological ups and downs; sometimes our determination and effort jumps about like a Mexican Jumping Bean.

Did you know that the aforementioned Jumping Bean is triggered into ‘jumping’ after a couple of moments held in the hand? Inside it there is a moth larva, which, when warmed, starts to feed (thus the bean moving about). Naturally.... that brings us on to another source of energy: spiritual energy. We are body, mind and spirit. All three interact. It is a mistake to concentrate on the body’s deficiencies, get stupefied by unhelpful thinking, and forget the spiritual dimension of our life. Spiritual determination is needed. But, what, you might ask, has any of this got to do with the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin being found?

On the surface this parable doesn’t seem to have much to do with repentance. St Luke tells us that tax collectors and sinners were gathering to hear Jesus teaching. Seeing the company Jesus kept, Pharisees and scribes murmured about it: these type should be disapproved of by a Rabbi, not entertained to a meal. This is the context of two illustrations of loss and recovery of something precious. They are resolved in a display of public joy. A shepherd loses a sheep and could be judged untrustworthy. A woman loses part of the dowry sewn onto her necklace or cap, and could be thought foolish and possibly accursed. These characters have to reverse their misfortune publicly, or they risk being shunned. Thus far: the Pharisees and scribes judge the tax collectors and sinners; whilst the village people judge the shepherd and the woman. By contrast, God, the ultimate Judge, rather unexpectedly allows angels to exhibit joy in the heavenly court when a sinner ‘publicly’ repents. The Pharisees, scribes and villagers should act like the angels do!

What is Jesus saying to all of them? He is saying that they should be joyful for, not critical of, other people wanting to hear His teaching, because it is a source of joy. They have to be prepared to stop criticising and to change their thinking. They might also see that it applies to them too. Further, people can fail to do their duty (shepherd losing a sheep), and be careless with prized possessions (coin dropping of a necklace or headdress), but what really matters is that they do something to correct their mistakes. In the Greek text it is clear that the shepherd and the woman *keep on searching* until they find what they are looking for. They *want* to change. They *want* forgiveness. It's interesting to note that neither of them have enlisted others to search with them. They would be ashamed to do so; it would make them look lazy or stupid or worse. Would you believe that some people won't approach their parish priest about some things lest they feel ashamed or stupid?! The devil wouldn't want them to be relieved of the burden by confession and absolution.

Repentance is like diligent searching. In fact, the act of assiduous repentance is applauded by Angels *before* a judgment is pronounced. Thus, get your attitude right! 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness...' (Matthew 6:33). Tax collector, sinner, Pharisee, scribe, must all alike have a disposition to live a penitent life. So must we. Such an approach to life is about getting a better perspective on oneself before the standards of a loving God (not doing oneself down). It makes us approach our fellow sinners in a different way, realising that what applies to them applies to us before God. In order for this to bear fruit, we must be persistent in our search for a right relationship with God.

That brings us back to the problem of our own physical, psychological and spiritual lethargy. It's true that we can be exhausted, depressed, and anxious. All these feed on each other, like a larva in a bean; they hollow one out. Repentance disarms some of these manifestations of dis-ease. There are many examples of Christians who have lived with physical and psychological problems that have made their existence difficult (but not a misery). For examples: St Therese of Lisieux lived as an invalid with tuberculosis and what has been called 'religious OCD' because she feared God would not love her; St Francis of Assisi had terrible eye problems, but learned to keep his body subservient to God's work for him amongst the poor; Joni Eareckson Tada broke her neck in a diving accident when she was seventeen and now at seventy-one she has breast cancer, but still heads up worldwide outreach to other disabled people. All of them live penitent lives. As should we.

A penitent life is one that derives spiritual energy from the Son! It doesn't add weight like depression. Under the influence of earth's gravity, and the devil's accusations, we slump. Repentance helps us to prepare for take-off. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, we fly. That's why we look vertically towards heaven for true joy, and not horizontally at our fellow sinners. The starting point every day is to leave the past behind. We can't change the past, but we can be prepared to change our mind with God's guidance. Repentance and a penitent life makes our spirit lighter.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.