

## [Luke 15:1-10](#)

At the recent Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops from around the world, Stephen Cottrell, the Archbishop of York, said,

McDonald's makes hamburgers  
Cadbury's makes chocolate  
Starbucks makes coffee  
The Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela make music  
Heineken makes beer  
Toyota makes cars  
Rolex makes watches  
The church of Jesus Christ makes disciples. That is our core business.<sup>1</sup>

It seems important to go back to this at a Covenant Service where we renew our commitment to Jesus in the light of his commitment to us. He calls us to make disciples.

But how?

Later in the same address Cottrell describes a conversation he had once on Paddington train station while waiting for a connection to Cardiff. A woman asked him why he became a priest. I won't quote his whole answer, but essentially he said that it was a combination of God calling him and his own desire to see change for the better in the world.

The woman then said to him

that when she met people of faith, she found they fitted into two categories. It either seems like their faith is like their hobby – either they go to church on Sunday but it doesn't change their life on Monday, or "they embraced their faith so tightly, it frightens everyone else away." I have seen these extremes, and she said to me "is there another way?"

The woman identified two wrong responses to finding Christian faith. What is wrong with them?

**The hobbyist** who comes on a Sunday but doesn't let it affect her way of life is someone who has not understood the Gospel. Or she may have understood the Gospel, but has chosen to look the other way.

As we have been seeing in Jesus' teaching in recent weeks, that just isn't a valid response to his coming. Yes, God loves us before we ever love him, but just because he meets us as we are doesn't mean he wants us to stay as we are.

An essential element of Christian faith is embracing God's agenda of transformation for us. That's what makes sense of renewing promises at a covenant service. We recognise once more the enormity of what God has done for us in Christ and we respond.

Call it an argument from silence if you will, but in the two parables we read the thought of there being no action in response to the missing sheep or the missing coin is just not countenanced. Finding the love of Jesus puts us on his team. We are co-opted into his mission.

So a good thing to reflect on for all of us this morning is this question: what part am I playing in the mission of God as a response to God's love for me?

Let me put it bluntly. How are we ever going to do more than just survive as a church unless more people step up to the plate? Right now we have a small group of people doing most of the work in this church. I can tell you, some of them get very tired! I lose count of how many hats some of them are wearing.

Friends, we need to lift burdens if we are to do more than just limp along as a church until we finally close.

But, you say, like so many people here I've got older. I don't have the strength to do something vigorous.

That's not a problem. Because you can begin with something simple that you can do. Even going on the tea and coffee rota would help. You can do that, can't you? Don't you make hot drinks for yourself at home? Then you can do it for your friends at church. And by doing so you can free up some of the people who are working to the bone in this church.

Similarly, you read for pleasure at home, or you may read for grandchildren. In that case, you can go on the rota of Bible readers for Sunday services. We have such a small rota of willing readers, but you could expand it. You do it at home, you can do it here.

And these are just simple jobs in the church. I'm not even asking you to be an evangelist at this point! But know this one thing. A Christian cannot be a hobbyist. We are on duty for the King.

The other group the woman who talked to Archbishop Cottrell identified were those who “embraced their faith so tightly, it frightens everyone else away.” Now these people do appear in our reading! They are there in verse 2:

<sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.’

For shorthand, I’m going to call this second group of people of faith **the Pharisees**.

There’s a big question here that we don’t always see: why on earth would the Pharisees condemn Jesus’ missionary outreach activity? They were a missionary group themselves. In Matthew 23:15 Jesus notes this:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!  
You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.

As I’ve said before, the Pharisee movement had been founded a long time before as a way of renewing the Jewish faith and bringing it back to basics. They were also missionary.

But they didn’t like Jesus’ methods. They had so longed for the renewal of Jewish faith but hadn’t seen it come to fruition. I think they had become frustrated, and with that cynical.

Not only that, because they had lofty aims they then became superior and self-righteous as they blamed others for the failure of their hopes.

And in that superiority, they refused to mix with those who failed to live up to their standards. Why would Jesus do differently from them? And perhaps embarrassingly, how come he attracts people and they don’t?

This toxic combination led to their condemnation of Jesus.

I want us to be passionate Christians, not hobbyists. Christianity is not a leisure activity, it’s a way of life. But there is danger when our passion gets misdirected when disappointment sets in. Then we start hurling insults from our ivory towers and we begin plotting against those who do things differently from us.

No wonder some Christians and some churches take on toxic atmospheres. No wonder some of those Christians and some of those churches end up committing spiritual abuse.

So if my plea to the hobbyists is to embrace the mission of God, my plea to the Pharisees is to keep your hearts tender and full of grace before a merciful God. If you recognise Pharisee tendencies in yourself, please remember that you too are a sinner in need of God's grace. You too are a beggar seeking bread.

And let that open you up to the loving heart of God that sends us on his mission.

But finally we come to **Jesus**, and his attitude is represented by the actions of the owner of the sheep in the first parable and the woman in the second.

For someone to own a hundred sheep in Jesus' day meant they were very wealthy. The typical family owned ten to fifteen. Perhaps Jesus made the number so large in his story as to make his point all the more strikingly to his listeners.

And when you hear of the woman's ten coins it is a mistake to think of ordinary loose change. Either these were her savings or they were the dowry money given to her by her husband when they married, which some women wore around their neck.<sup>2</sup> The lost coin is valuable!

The parable of the lost sheep shows how Jesus will not simply be the chaplain to those who remain safely at home. He cares for the lost.

The parable of the coin takes this a little further and shows us just how valuable to him those lost from his love and the family of God are.

All this means that if we are to renew our commitment to working out the teaching of Jesus, then we need to rethink the priorities of the church.

If you ask many Christians what the main purpose of the church is, they will answer, 'worship.' I remember that coming out at the top of a survey in my home church, for example.

But is that right? Might we learn from the Westminster Catechism, the document so beloved of Presbyterian Christians? It said that 'the chief end of man' (please excuse the exclusive language of a bygone day) was 'to glorify God and enjoy him for ever.'

I'll leave aside 'enjoying God' for another time. But 'glorifying God' is more than Sunday worship. Certainly we glorify God in worship, but we also glorify him when we spread his name in the world and witness to it in our words and deeds. We glorify God when we share Jesus' heart for those who are lost from him, as we see in these parables.

What if God's vision for our church were a reordering of our life so that we glorified him every day and everywhere? What if we reordered our church around the glorification of God rather than the gathered worship of God?

To do that, we need to put away our 'hobby' approach to religion and repent in humility of our 'Pharisee' tendencies.

Then we need to embrace the heart of love Jesus has for the world.

So what about it? Who fancies remaking the church?

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.premierchristianity.com/bishops-should-always-have-the-name-of-jesus-on-their-lips-archbishop-of-yorks-message-to-church-leaders/13569.article>

<sup>2</sup> On both the number of sheep and the nature of the coins, see <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/the-short-parables-of-the-lost-in-luke-15/>