

Belonging to God

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on Trinity 16, Sun 11 September 2016 in St Peter's Wolvercote. *Refs: Exodus 32.7-14, 1 Timothy 1.12-17, Luke 15.1-10*
(*Personal names have been removed in this version for the website*)

We live in a big Universe. We've recently heard about the probe visiting Jupiter – a planet that is two and a half times the mass of all the other planets in the Solar System combined. And we've heard about the discovery of a nearby planet – a mere 25 trillion miles away. But that's nothing. We live in a Universe of 100 thousand million galaxies, each galaxy containing something around several 100 thousand million stars.

When we talk about God as Creator of the Universe, this is what we're talking about. The Consciousness behind the Cosmos, The Mind behind the Universe, the Mind whose thought "Let there be Light" led to a silent explosion of light – what we call the Big Bang.

So can what we're doing [a baptism] in church this morning have anything to do with this Creator God? Can this God know us or even know that we exist?

Our Gospel reading today - one of the delightful stories Jesus told about what God is like - says YES.

This is the story of a crazy shepherd. Logic says – if you're looking after 100 sheep in the Wilderness and one gets lost – then just cut your losses – write off the one and keep the 99 safe. But this is a true shepherd – a crazy shepherd that cares so much about each individual sheep, that he will not let even one go.

And that, Jesus is saying, is what God is like.

And this is not just one story. It's what the coming of Jesus is all about. God comes to us, not in a great army of angels, but as one human being – one man who could meet us individually. And this runs right through the stories of Jesus – Jesus meeting with individuals one by one – we know many of them by name – Jesus meets them often at a very deep level - because each individual person mattered to Jesus.

And here Jesus is telling us – this is what God is like. The crazy shepherd who cares so passionately about each individual sheep – it wouldn't matter if there were 99 billion – he would still go after the one.

That is how much you and I matter individually and personally to God. "Even the hairs of your head are counted" says Jesus. Though God is often a mystery to us, he knows us – each one of us – at a deeply personal level.

Today we are proclaiming this for those who are being baptised this morning – that God knows each of them personally and cares about them deeply. Today we are proclaiming this for those we are welcoming to receive Communion today for the first time – that it is God who is inviting them each, individually to that special one-to-one moment as we each, individually receive the bread and wine. Today we are proclaiming this for these children who are here this morning to be welcomed after Baptism – that God is welcoming each one of them, individually, to join his family.

And that's why I come to church – not because I like liturgy or singing hymns, however much I value them, but because here in this space in our worship, there is the possibility of each individual one of us having a personal encounter with the Creator of the Universe.

In this sense, each one of us is the Lost Sheep.

But that leads me on to the question - what does it mean to be "lost"?

It was very moving, in the recent Olympics, to see the refugee team, competing under the Olympic flag. They were there representing a huge number – refugees with no flag, no state, no community, no identity – that is more "lost" than most of us can ever imagine being. But there are many others who must feel similarly "lost" – what about the thousands living in squalor in those Rio Favelas – too poor to have any chance of joining in the party? Or what about the homeless in our own country, without home, without family, without community? And of course, like Jesus, we are called to look out with compassion to those who experience being lost - in any way.

But we too can feel lost at times. Maybe after a bereavement, or illness in the family, or a family break up, or suffering from depression or anxiety, or perhaps as a young person going to a new school where you don't know anyone – we too can feel lost. Some of us felt a little lost the few days after the Brexit vote – wondering where we now belong in the world. There are different things that can make us lose our sense of identity, lose our sense of community, lose our sense of belonging.

Back in April, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, suddenly discovered that the man he had always thought was his father, was not actually his father at all. It was a complete surprise to him, but his response was clear: "I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ, not in genetics, and my identity in him never changes."

That was not a pious statement, but an inspired insight. Our ultimate sense of identity is that we are God's beloved children, and we belong to God himself. We may go through times of suffering, we may go through times of being alone or even in despair, but we are never lost – our identity is in God himself, as his beloved sons and daughters, and with him we are never alone.

And this is God's promise today – to those being baptised today, those being welcomed after Baptism, and those coming to receive Communion for the first time – and to all of us. God is welcoming us to be his children, his beloved sons and daughters, and we belong to God, not just now, but for all eternity, and nothing and no one can ever take that away from us.