

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 15th September 2019
Luke 15: 1 – 10

Have you ever felt hefted? You probably have.

For years I walked the hills and moors of Scotland, and drove through the glens wondering how it was that sheep farmers didn't lose their sheep. In Scotland, some sheep are in fields, but in a country that has more sheep than people, most sheep are everywhere.

They wander over the hillsides, upon the moors, across roads, into gardens. There is no place, no island, no mountain, no moor in Scotland so remote that there isn't a sheep bleating there. How do farmers keep track? How is it sheep don't get lost, separated from the farmer? Why isn't it the case that we don't see frantic farmers striding over the fields searching for their sheep?

A few years ago, I found out why. I read a book by a shepherd called *The Shepherd's Life*, an account of James Rebanks' sheep farm in the Eden Valley, which lies between the Pennines, on its eastern side, and the Lake District in the west. As Mr Rebanks describes, hill sheep, it turns out, are attached to the land they live on in a very special way; they are hefted to the land.

To be hefted is to form a deep, abiding relationship and attachment to a place. Sheep form such an attachment. They know the limits of the land that they are hefted to, so they don't wander off. Within those boundaries they know where to find what they most need: pools of refreshing water; a salt lick; herbs that are medicinal; shelter from the storm; sweet, green pasture.

Not only do hill sheep know where these places are and the limits of their landscape, but they also pass on this knowledge to their lambs. Indeed, it appears that lambs don't need to be shown the limits and the nature of the land to which the flock is hefted. It is as if that knowledge is passed on to them through their mother's milk.

The reason farmers can easily herd their sheep is because their flocks are hefted to a piece of the land; intimately attached to it; deeply knowledgeable of it; they won't ever stray off it. But, for any reason they are removed from their hefted land, if something happens that breaks their relationship to the land, as happened, for example, a number of years ago during a crisis of foot and mouth disease when whole flocks were moved from one hillside to another, then sheep suffer. They become stressed; confused; unwell; sometimes some of them will die.

Are you hefted? Where is your place? When you are in need of fresh water, where do you go? When you are in need of healing, where do you go? When you are in need of some zest and zeal from a salt lick, where do you go? When you feel the need to walk on green pasture, where do you go? When you need shelter from the storm, where do you go? To which place are you hefted?

But, wait a minute. That is not right, is it? People aren't sheep. People don't behave like sheep. What animal do people behave like, or what animal most behaves like people? Rats. People are less like sheep, and more like rats. If you take a rat out of its sewer and move it to another sewer it won't notice the difference. But, if you take a rat and remove it from its family, its fellow rats, its community and put it on its own, in isolation; it suffers, it becomes stressed, sick and it dies – of loneliness.

That is what people are like; we are social animals. The question is not, *where* do you go, but *to whom* do you go when you are in need of life-giving water? *To whom* do you go when your body or soul is sick? *To whom* do you go when you need to breathe the air of green pastures? *To whom* do you go when you need energy and zeal? *To whom* do you go when you need shelter from the storm? Who is your shepherd?

When Jesus told the parable of the lost sheep, he wasn't talking about sheep, he was talking about people. When people stray, when people are lost, when people have wandered off, they are in danger, great danger. Not because they have wandered away from a place, or a house, or a city, or a country, but because they have become separated from other people.

We were both in the playground one afternoon last week down in Corstorphine Primary School, my son and I, but we couldn't see each other. You know that feeling when you have lost something? And, you know that feeling when that something is a child? It wasn't for long, and it turned out we were in the same place the whole time, not far from each other at all, the playground, but when my son and I found each other we both felt that sense of relief that is indistinguishable from triumph.

'How delighted is he then? He lifts it on to his shoulders, and home he goes to call his friends and neighbours together. "I have found my lost sheep."

That is the new covenant, and it is different from the old. The Old Covenant found in the Old Testament was about the relationship between a group of people, their God and the land that was promised to them by their God. Their relationship with this Promised Land was deep, abiding and personal. There's nothing wrong with the Old Covenant, with a deep, abiding, personal attachment to a piece of land, just ask any refugee.

The land we live on is important, which is why we have to care for it, steward it, cultivate it, nurture it. The land is important for our survival, which is why a changing climate is an important issue. But, although the land we live on is important for living, it is not what gives us life, or what sustains our lives. It is not the thing that can breathe into us the breath of new life or the thing that when we are separated from it, sucks life from us. What gives us life is our relationships to other people. What sucks life from us is our separation from other people.

As the woman, who was searching for the lost coin in the other parable, knew; people are precious. The parable of the lost coin is not about coins, it is about people. People are precious, even just one person. A person is like a silver coin; precious. A person lost and then found should be carried home in triumph.

If a person is lost, you have to find them because they could die out there on their own. As the third story of loss, tells us, the one that follows immediately on from the two we read, the parable of the Prodigal Son, there is good reason to argue that social death, when someone is cut off completely from their family, friends, community, church, country, can often, not always, be worse for everyone than even mortal death.

The new covenant is about a relationship of people to God and to other people. If you believe that your most important relationship is not to other people, but instead is to a piece of land, or to a country, or to a flag, or to a nation, or to an anthem, or to a constitution, or to a philosophy, or to a law-code, or to a religion, or even to an abstract God who has no personal investment in people himself, then eventually, if not immediately, you will discover that you are lost. Of course, our relationship to these things is important. But, none of our relationships to these things are as valuable as our relationships to other people.

...the tax-gatherers and other bad characters were all crowding in to listen to Jesus, and the Pharisees and the doctors of the law began grumbling among themselves: "This fellow," they said, "welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus was indeed eating with sinners, bad characters and tax-gatherers. No wonder, they were ones who found themselves separated from other people, from polite society, from God in the synagogue. They were ones whom the Pharisees and the doctors of the law thought were less important than the land, their law code, their nation, their religion.

Jesus didn't; which is why he was eating with them, and why they were crowding round to hear what he had to say. Not that in what he had to say to them was he letting those sinners off the hook. He wasn't. He told tax-gatherers like Zacchaeus to repay four-fold what they had defrauded, and to give half their wealth to the poor. To the sinner caught in adultery, he told her to go and sin no more. But, he wasn't prepared to let precious people, who had wandered off from their hefted relationships with others, remain lost.

That was why God was in Jesus Christ. A God who does not draw close to his people is a God who leaves us dying in the wilderness. In Jesus Christ God became a person like us to bring us in to a close, abiding, deep, hefted relationship with him. In the power of the Holy Spirit God forms us in to a community of people, a body of people, a Church, that is defined most importantly not by its relationship to a building, or to a part of this city, but by a close, abiding, deep, hefted relationship with each other, and the precious people who live around about us in this parish, in this community, in this city and in this world.

If once you were lost, then here amongst these people, the body of Jesus Christ, the people of God, you are found.