



THE NEW SHOFAR

The Good News for us is the way Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them.

September 11th

Hearing the word of God we hear the invitation to healing

At the end of the previous chapter, Jesus had offered an invitation to everyone without exception: *let the one who has ears listen*. In our present chapter he continues to build on this verb. The verb (to listen) in the Bible includes notions of being *restored*. In the prophets, it is by hearing/listening to the word of God that sinners and outcasts become a part of a *restored people*. It is from this point we can better understand what Jesus is saying – the sinners hear Jesus, respond to his words and are restored. The Pharisees refuse to listen, to repent and so isolate themselves from the gifts of the Kingdom being offered to them. Both make choices.

Do not mix with lost causes – they will infect you with their grime

The Pharisees echo warnings I heard many times from my mum – don't mix with bad company. But challenges the Pharisees make to Jesus took on a sanctimonious ring. Here we see Jesus seeking out the sinners, reminding them they were the very ones to whom his Father had sent him. **They were** God's kind of people. The Jewish leaders saw things very differently. The sinners **were definitely not** God's people. They would never be acceptable to God. They were lost causes and should not be a part of the religious "in group", the group consisting of those who are saved.

So also for the Pharisees: there were good and righteous people like themselves—these were people whom God could not fail to love because they were just so morally attractive. They were acknowledged as town leaders, people of integrity like the Pharisees themselves. They are the ones who could be respected and listened to.

Who do we consider to be beyond our tolerance, our love and our embrace?

But then on the other side there were pagans, tax collectors and prostitutes whom God could not possibly love no matter what. They had proved themselves to be beyond help and needed to be kept in their position. Their very presence in gatherings and workplaces was an offence of the very worst kind. For the Pharisees, that was simply the way things were. It was the way of the world. It was not worth investing time, patience or effort in "redeeming" them. They were lost to all.

So then, when these “lost causes” suddenly hear the teachings of Jesus about how God is the lover of lost causes they gathered around him. Their attention would have been grabbed when he reassured them of how the Heavenly Father gathers to himself those who are rejected by the “pharisees”, by those who consider themselves to be morally righteous. Maybe this Jesus fellow could lift them beyond their own self-doubt, could give them the courage to move out into a world of equals who love all who come their way. In Jesus, could they truly find redemption and salvation?

But Jesus tells us God loves and seeks out life’s “lost causes”

Imagine their joy when they were told how God rejoiced more than anything else over one soul who had found their way home to him than the ninety-nine who wallowed in the self-satisfying myth of their own righteousness and sinlessness. They must have wanted to shout it aloud from the pinnacle of the Temple – *in the eyes of God there are no such people as lost causes*. They may well have been lost. They were certainly wandering within the society of the time looking for a home. Jesus now declared how they were the very people for whom God was searching.

Now look at what this might have sounded like to the ears of the Pharisees. Suddenly those who had been pleased with themselves and the way they had battled to keep these outcasts “in their place” find divine blessings coming to those they had despised! With Jesus they had become people lost to the Kingdom. Lost only because they had chosen to close their ears to the teachings of this man from Galilee.

Luke’s Jesus is offering us a message of Joy and not condemnation

It is when we listen with ears attuned to the graciousness of God we can understand how it is we too are invited to rejoice alongside the Almighty in the restoration of the “lost causes” of this world. Whatever it is about them that the world dislikes God dismisses as being the same self-righteousness that afflicted and condemned the Pharisees. When we can learn to find joy in their restoration, we can learn to find joy in our own.

This is one area of society in which we, as disciples of Christ, can have an incredibly positive impact. The only thing making someone a “lost cause” is the unjust judgment of others. As we step back from them and strive to keep them out of the world of friendship, respect and acceptance in which we believe we are living, God is “out there” searching for those we have judged to be unworthy of us. How sad it is when we have Christians who damn others to the fringes of our parish community, our op.shops, our offers of companionship, forgiveness and love. Every time we jump on them and marginalise them, God is there lifting them up, embracing them and restoring them to his side.

Our reading today is shot through with a sense of mission. But let us make sure the motivation right: it is not because this is some burdensome religious duty we just

have to do if we want God to love us. No, it's because we remember the joy of our own salvation, of our own having been found by the Saviour. It is now our privilege to beam that joy to all and to invite others to come and join the heavenly celebration by letting Jesus become their Lord and Saviour too. It comes when we remember the never-ending ocean of love and hope motivating God's own search. He will not give up on anyone. He cannot. In the story of salvation we find in our scriptures, God's very nature is to be inclusive; of everyone, saints and sinners alike. And us?