

[\(00:09\):](#)

Hello and welcome to this episode of the St Andrew's Enfield podcast with me, Steve Griffiths. As I record this, the Coronavirus continues to sweep the world and the UK, where I live, is just entering into a period of lockdown and there's a lot of fear and anxiety among the people I'm in touch with and a lot of loneliness and feelings of frailty and vulnerability. And I'm sure it's the same wherever you are as well. And we continue to find ways to stay strong in our faith in the light of all that's going on around us and perhaps in our own families as well. And in the last podcast, we thought about Psalm 121 and how God promises to keep us and what that may mean for us. And in this episode, I want to think about how we respond in faith to the Coronavirus threat by thinking about another passage in the Bible this time, uh, thinking about, uh, a passage from the Gospel of Matthew chapter 18 verses 10 to 14.

[\(01:22\):](#)

It's a really well known passage, uh, it's a well known parable of Jesus concerning the lost sheep and how the shepherd will go to find that lost sheep and will rejoice when he eventually finds it. And of course, this is a parable about how God loves each one of us so much, uh, that he will seek us out and he will find us when we are feeling lost. This is not a parable about those people, uh, on the margins of society so much as a parable about those of us who feel lost and vulnerable in our daily lives or in our own walk with God and certainly as we feel emotions of vulnerability and anxiety in the face of Coronavirus. It's a story about how, um, when we are feeling weak and vulnerable, God will seek us out and will bring us home to him. And this is a story, it's a spiritual truth, that we all need to hear, uh, because which one of us has never felt vulnerable in life, uh, which one of us has never felt lost with God, not sure what to believe in when the storms of life have threatened to overwhelm us? We've all been that lost sheep at one time or another and perhaps you are feeling that you are that lost sheep today.

[\(03:11\):](#)

So this is a parable to give us comfort when we need it, but it also begins with a warning for us all about how we are to treat our Christian brothers and sisters when they are feeling weak in faith or anxious or afraid. As Jesus says in verse 10, "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven". It seems like a really strange thing to say, doesn't it? But actually it's not uncommon for Christians to despise their brothers and sisters who are struggling in life or struggling in the Christian faith. Well, what does that look like? Well, the word 'despise' means to look down on someone, to consider that person inferior or not really worth caring for. And sadly that attitude is too often seen in our churches far and wide.

[\(04:15\):](#)

A Christian who has been coming to church for many years despises the lack of understanding of a new Christian or the fact that they may behave differently in church. A new Christian may despise the standoffish behavior of a more established believer or one Christian may look down on another Christian because of certain things they do in their life, which the first Christian doesn't approve of, or perhaps because of something in his or her past, which has come to light. Sometimes Christians want to spend time seeking the approval or friendship of a particular group of believers and so don't bother chatting with other people over coffee after the service is finished. Despising others can happen in many different ways. And most of those ways are sins of omission, uh, ignoring others, not really caring for others as we should. And rarely would one Christian actually feel the emotion of despising another or actually hating them.

[\(05:23\)](#):

But by refusing to care enough or value someone else enough, the act of despising has happened. And Jesus warns us against this in very strong terms indeed, and each one of us needs to be constantly on our guard and examine ourselves to make sure that we are not despising others; not so much through what we do, but through what we don't do. Are we seeking out newcomers and making them feel welcome? Are we acting out of kindness through our words and our actions? Are we looking out for those who are struggling in the faith and encouraging them? Jesus says, "take care that you do not despise one of these little ones". And why is that so important? Well he goes on to say is, "for I tell you in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven". So what does he mean by that?

[\(06:25\)](#):

Well, some people have taken that to mean that children have guardian angels in heaven watching over them, but I don't really think that's what Jesus is saying here. It's much broader than that. What Jesus is suggesting is that in heaven, angels are assigned to the spiritual care of all believers. It's not just children, it's all of us. Now, I've got to be completely honest with you and say that I really don't have a clue what angels are or what they do or what their relationship is to us and to God. You know, there's loads of warm and fuzzy ideas in society about what angels are, but very few of them actually have anything to do with the Christian faith and what the Bible has to say about angels. So generally I tend to discount those as some sort of myth. But all I know from this passage is that in some sense, and I don't understand how or what, there are heavenly beings who have care and concern for each one of us today.

[\(07:33\)](#):

And if the heavenly beings care for each one of us, then it is our responsibility to care for one another. The issue about the nature of angels is a bit of a sideshow here. What's really important is how you and I care for one another in the way that God wants us to. But if you're feeling vulnerable in your faith at the moment, then you can take comfort in the fact that you have support; not only from God, not only from other Christians around you from your own church community, but also from the heavenly hosts of angels, whatever that may be. If you remember one thing from this podcast today, it must be this. You are not alone.

[\(08:37\)](#):

And then Jesus moves on to the ultimate description of care and compassion that is available to each one of us, which is the care and compassion of our heavenly Father towards us. And to do that, Jesus shares this parable with his disciples, the parable of the lost sheep. And he says this: "If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the 99 on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it truly, I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the 99 that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost." Well, let's unpack that parable a little bit so we can understand Jesus' teaching better. Now we know of course that tending sheep was a major role in Palestine during the days of Jesus because it was such an agricultural context.

[\(09:37\)](#):

So Jesus' question to the disciples here is purely rhetorical because everyone knew the value of sheep to the community and everyone knew that any shepherd worth his salt would seek out a lost sheep. That was their job. They would secure the 99 and they would seek out the lost one. But it's a lovely analogy

because it reminds us that all of God's sheep, each one of us, are equally loved and cared for by God. It doesn't matter which sheep has gone astray. He will seek out any one of his flock and bring them back home. None are more important to God than another. He will not seek out a Pope or an Archbishop of Canterbury any more than he will seek out you or me because he loves us just as much as he loves a Pope or an Archbishop of Canterbury. We are all equal in his eyes.

[\(10:38\)](#):

We are all equally his children and we are all equally loved. And just as importantly, God doesn't make any judgment on why the sheep is lost. He just goes out to find it. Now perhaps the sheep has got lost by accident or uh, perhaps the sheep has done something really stupid that has separated it from the flock. It doesn't matter to God. A lost sheep is a lost sheep and it needs finding. So whether you or I have gone astray due to tough circumstances of life or whether you or I have done something really stupid to separate us from God, it really doesn't matter to him. He will come and find us without any judgment at all because God loves each one of us beyond anything that we can imagine. And not only will God seek us out, he will rejoice when he finds us. As Jesus reminds us in verse 13 "and if he finds it truly, I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the 99 that never went astray".

[\(11:51\)](#):

When a lost sheep is found, there is much rejoicing. When a Christian is restored to the church or strengthened in faith, the whole of heaven rejoices at that. When you return to the Lord, when I return to the Lord, the whole of heaven rejoices. But of course that's something, uh, in the Anglican tradition and in many other, uh, denominations around the world, that's something we remind ourselves of each week in the, uh, the Communion Prayer when we say, "therefore with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven, we laud and magnify your glorious name forever praising you and singing". Now, these are not just poetic words. This is a description of a spiritual reality that is happening every time we worship together. It's a spiritual reality that is going on in heaven every time one of us returns to God. So if you are struggling to hold onto your faith in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, just remember that God is still out there searching for you and longing to bring you home. And when you get back home to him, there is a party waiting to happen in heaven being held in your honor.

[\(13:27\)](#):

And so Jesus concludes this beautiful parable by reiterating the overwhelming power of God's love for each of us. In verse 14 he says, "so it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost". God loves you so much. God loves me so much. He doesn't want any one of us to be lost, to be hurt, to feel vulnerable or afraid. His overwhelming concern is for your happiness and contentment in life, and that you should feel safe and secure in his loving arms. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep, and he wants you to experience the depth of that love and care in your life today. So this is a short parable, but it has so much to teach us. We're reminded that each one of us has a responsibility for each other, that we're not to despise those who express their faith differently from us, that we're not to judge others for being weaker in faith or judge those who may have something in their past, of which they're not proud.

[\(14:48\)](#):

That kind of attitude does not reflect the loving heart of God. We're reminded that God loves each one of us so much that he has angels in heaven looking out for us and guarding us as we walk through life, and we're reminded that no matter where we're at in life, God will seek us out if we are feeling lost or

anxious or afraid. It doesn't matter how you got lost in the first place, God will seek you out, and he doesn't want any of us during this period of the Coronavirus crisis to be lost to him through our anxieties or our fears or our grief. We're reminded that when we return to God or when we're found by him, the whole of heaven rejoices. It's a beautiful passage and a beautiful expression of God's love and care for you. So if you're feeling lost today or if you're feeling afraid, or if you know deep in your heart that you've strayed from God, then let him find you today.

[\(16:03\)](#):

Call out his name and he will hear you and he will restore you. And as you do, the whole of heaven will rejoice. Well, I hope that you've found this a useful podcast. Uh, if you've got any questions or comments, it's always really lovely to hear from you. So, uh, just drop me an email to [steve.griffiths@london.anglican.org](mailto:steve.griffiths@london.anglican.org). And wherever you are today, whatever you are doing, my prayer is that God will give you his healing peace in the midst of this Coronavirus crisis, and that you will know his love and his care for you. So stay safe. Don't forget to wash your hands, and I look forward to being with you again in the next episode. Bye.

[\(17:04\)](#):

[inaudible].