Trinity 4, 2020

"Be ye therefore merciful as your Father also is merciful." (St. Luke 6.36)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Last week the Lord Jesus spoke to us about repentance. Repentance involves being honest with ourselves about the excuses we often make; it also requires leaving our selfish pursuits and turning back to God. Last week's Gospel presented a picture of how God is like a shepherd who leaves all the other sheep in order to rescue the one that is lost.

But, we also reflected on the fact that people do not always want to be found. We do not always want to turn back to God and repent. Why? Because it is costly; it is involves making sacrifices and changing priorities. It is easier to pretend – to talk about it but not really do it. It is easier to just continue on in the same direction rather than to turn around. The spirit may be willing, but it is true: our flesh is weak.

For those who do make the turn and repent, there are some responsibilities; and the Gospel urges us to adopt them. One of the key responsibilities we have in the 'found' life – the Christian life – the new life – is putting away a judging and condemning spirit. "Judge not, and ye shall not be judged," Jesus said, "condemn not and ye shall not be condemned".

Before we go further, let's take a minute to think about what it means to be lost and found. There are many animal rescue stories on You Tube that can help us get a better grip on the reality of our spiritual condition without Christ. For example, I was moved by the story of a little cocker spaniel that was abandoned by its owner in the wilderness. When found by someone who was out four-wheeling, this little dog named Kelly, was all alone, completely bald and without any fur. My heart also went out to a one year old puppy named Merc. Merc, too, had been unloved and starved. In fact, he was so malnourished that he could not walk. He could only stand. His ribs and every other bone were sticking out of his body, and he was a ghastly sight. He was very near death and the veterinarian wept as the camera showed the extent of his condition.

Our daughter, Isabelle, had a similar story to tell about Phoebe, a kitten she rescued. Phoebe was terribly malnourished; she had parasites and her fur was full

of lice. She could only take a couple of steps and then she would sit a let out a small, pathetic 'meow'. Her body weight was so low she had to be wrapped in a towel most of the time. The stories of Phoebe, Kelly and Merc are about lives that were judged to be unworthy and not valuable. These pets were discarded and left to die.

In each case, the transformation after a year was incredible: Kelly had a beautiful brown and white fur coat; Merc had a significant weight-gain and was actually running and playing ball; and Phoebe was able to eat and run, and she was free of the lice. In each case, the animal was full of energy, happy and loving toward their owner.

What struck me the most by these stories was the devastation that comes with being lost, unloved, abandoned, hungry, cold, sick, weak, wretched, pitiful and scared. Maybe the lost sheep in last week's Gospel was in a much worse condition than we have imagined after years of hearing that story. Maybe that sheep was actually hungry, wet, cold or injured. Maybe it had been lost for a few days and spent some nights alone in the woods. The point is, without the Lord Jesus Christ, our very situation is desperate; dire; hopeless. We may not be malnourished or alone physically, but deep down, our souls are afraid; there is a little voice that cries out for acceptance, assurance, purpose and hope.

As adult human beings, there are at least two things to remember about our 'lostness'. On the one hand, every person is born in a lost condition. Yes, we may have a loving family that brings us into the world and nurtures us; but we still need to be found spiritually. We need to come to grips with our need for the Jesus the Good Shepherd; and, until we do, we remain lost.

On the other hand, coming to grips with our need for Christ and His mercy may be hindered by a number of things: we may have been hurt or abused as a child; we may have wandered off the path all on our own, in search of freedom or as a way of exercising our personal rights. We may have had a bad attitude. Tragically, although God offers us new life by His Spirit, many people – even those who have attended Church for years -- do not grasp it. Consequently, the benefits of that new life are never realized. We lack confidence, joy and peace. We remain unsure about the truth of God's holy Word; of His forgiveness; and we doubt that His

promises are real. In the end, we continue to wander about aimlessly, and without hope, instead of repenting and following Christ.

When we do repent and turn around, and respond to the Lord, and open the door of our heart, and ask Him to come in and help us and save us, everything changes. The darkness of our minds is bathed in the beautiful Light of His Spirit, and we are able to see the truth clearly – the truth about who we really are and where our hope lies. We begin to catch a glimpse of God's infinite love and mercy. I see the Cross differently – how that Jesus hung there and suffered and bled and died there for me. I begin to understand that God loves me, and I am willing to see the destructiveness of my dead-end ways.

As Kelly and Merc and Pheobe experienced new life in being found, so we do too – only it is the very life of God Himself – the new and everlasting Life of the risen Christ. This new reality does not mean that we can coast or that we are excused from responsibility and suffering. In fact, both are addressed in today's Epistle and Gospel. The Epistle, for example, speaks about the suffering and groaning of the creation as though it was a person. St. Paul wrote, "We know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan within ourselves, waiting for our full adoption as sons, even the redemption of our body."

Early on summer mornings, when the birds are singing, or when the rain is falling softly, or when the sun is just rising, there does not seem to be this groaning. But as soon as the first ambulance or police or fire truck siren wails – usually just after six o'clock – we are quickly reminded of the fallen condition of our world. As those who know what it is to be found, we groan while we wait for Jesus to return. We groan, Paul says, as a woman in labour who awaits the birth of her child. We know there is something infinitely better, so, for now we experience hardship, disappointment and suffering; and we groan, but with HOPE.

As those who were lost but now are found, we also have a responsibility to follow our Saviour. This is key if we want to remain found! One of those responsibilities – a hallmark of the new life in Christ – is to put away a judging spirit, and to be merciful. We have received God's abundant mercy. Rather than condemn us, He has come to rescue and save us through His Son. And therefore He calls us to stop

condemning others. What exactly was Jesus talking about when He said, “Judge not, and you shall not be judged: condemn not and you shall not be condemned”?

One commentator gave this explanation: “The judging …is judging so as to censure (blame) and condemn; the ‘condemning’ signifies a downright condemning – a condemning without mercy, and without making any allowance for the circumstances. The censorious spirit rejoices in the iniquity of its neighbour. It is the food on which it preys. It looks out for it, and is determined to find it whether it be there or not. The loving spirit, on the contrary, “believes all things” – that is, that the heart is not so bad as the action seems to show; the loving spirit hopes all things – that an acquittal or excuse will soon be found”.

“Be ye merciful as your Father also is merciful”. This is the Lord’s Word to us who have been found. Once we were lost: we had not purpose or hope; we groped around in the dark looking for love and belonging, and for meaning. But, in Christ Jesus, we have been found. We have been grafted into His life in Holy Baptism, and we have been made the children of God. The Holy Spirit actually dwells in us.

And He has come, not to leave us as we were, but to lift us up and to fit us for Heaven. He has come to bless us so that we may be a blessing to others – that they too may be found. Therefore, having received the Mercy of God through Christ, let us extend His mercy to others.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit…