

**READING:** *Exodus 32.7-14*

At the top of Mount Sinai, the LORD said to Moses, 'Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"' The LORD said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.'

But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, 'O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, "I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your

descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever.'" And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

**GOSPEL: Luke 15.1-10**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Who here has ever been a teacher? Or a parent?  
Or anyone really who has cared for children in  
some way?

If so, did you ever hear these words:

“ It’s not my fault, she told me to do it”.

Or maybe:

“It wasn’t me, he did it”.

So what’s going on here? One word; blame.

The stories Jesus told are sometimes so familiar to  
us that we go straight to the tried and tested  
meanings that we have heard many times before.  
And today’s stories are no exception.

Of course, we think to ourselves, I’m the little lost  
sheep and Jesus came to find me and save me and  
bring me home. Even our hymns reinforce this  
idea, some of which we are singing this morning.

This interpretation is not necessarily wrong, but  
it’s not the only way to look at the story of the lost  
sheep. So what I want to do this morning is throw  
the story up in the air and see if it can land  
another way. Because I’m not convinced that  
Jesus was talking about our personal salvation  
when he told these stories.

When we try to understand what Jesus meant in  
his stories, it’s important to look at the context.  
What was happening to trigger the story? What

was the bigger political and religious picture?

Who was Jesus responding to? And, most important, who did he think were the lost sheep?

Today we see Jesus responding to the accusations of the pharisees and scribes. The religious and legal experts when it came to interpreting the scriptures, and the laws of Moses.

Now the scriptures that they were concerned with was what we call the Old Testament. The pre-Jesus part of the Bible. We read part of it this morning.

Throughout the Old Testament we learn about the different ways the ancient Hebrews thought about God. We learn about their theology. And a lot of

the theology was based on the kind of understanding of God that we see in our first reading. If you follow God's laws, everything will be fine. The people will flourish and be blessed. If you don't, well, you're stuffed. God will make sure you get punished.

Actually, there are lots of other ways of understanding God demonstrated in the Old Testament. A God of mercy and lovingkindness. A God whose love endures forever. A God who is faithful, even when his people are not. A God who seeks out his people, and leads them, and is with them in trouble.

But the pharisees and the scribes, who were criticising Jesus at the beginning of our reading, they were mostly concerned with whether or not people were keeping the law properly. I wonder why?

At that time the people were living under a brutal Roman regime. Their country had been occupied. And the prevailing theology told them that God was punishing them for disobeying God's laws. So it followed that at least some people had done exactly that.

And Jesus was hanging out with the people who were being blamed. Sinners and tax collectors.

The lost sheep were the people being blamed for everything that was going wrong.

So who exactly were the sinners and the tax collectors?

Sinners were simply those people who didn't comply with all the details of the religious laws. That was probably most people, including Jesus at times.

Tax collectors collected taxes, and often collected more than they were supposed to, so they were just universally hated. But under the Roman occupation, they had to bid for contracts to collect taxes. So to get the contract they had to go low. So as a matter of course they supplemented their

income where they could. The Romans didn't care how the money was raised, as long as they got paid.

Ordinary people at that time were barely scraping by. The nation was in dire straits. And of course, according to the pharisees and lawgivers, if the nation was suffering, it was to do with people sinning; breaking God's laws.

This kind of thinking was widespread. The disciples saw a blind man one day, and asked Jesus, who sinned? Was it him or his parents? If bad things happened, there was someone to blame. And if bad things happened to the nation as a whole, there were lots of people to blame.

There was a deeply ingrained culture of blame in the land, backed up by the theology of the religious leaders. And you couldn't blame the Romans, or you'd end up crucified!

So Jesus seeks out the company of those who are being blamed. We aren't told whether or not it was right that they were being blamed, we just know that Jesus is deliberately going after them to save them.

This blame culture goes all the way back to the Adam and Eve myth. Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent.

Today, here in this country and across the world, there is a culture of blame.

We grow up being affected by blame. We get blamed as children, and we get blamed as adults.

If we are blamed, what happens inside us? I think it takes root and we feel shame. So the first instinct is to try and shift the blame onto someone else, and the shame spreads.

If we see it happening with children, it probably still happens with adults, but adults can cause even more harm because they have more power.

Some of us will know very well the kind of damage blame can do. And sometimes the most damage comes when we blame ourselves.

Pretty much anyone who has been a parent knows how to blame themselves. What did I do wrong? Why is my child like this? Was I not supportive enough? Was I too hard on them, or was I too soft?

Let's take a look at some of the wider issues we face in this country.

Who are we blaming for the difficulties we face? For homelessness, a dysfunctional NHS, violence against women, child poverty, lack of affordable housing? Who are we blaming when we see kids doing wheelies on electric bikes down the middle of the street?

Parents? Transgender people? People who are “woke”? Young people? The government? Politicians in general?

There’s a really good charity in Nottingham that provides help for homeless people, and they have done for many years. Emmanuel House. Last week they ran out of food to provide meals for their clients, and they appealed for help. Some of the responses they got were really shocking.

People saying that they wouldn’t contribute while we were still helping refugees, because obviously they were the reason people were homeless. But homeless people have been around certainly as long as I can remember, and long before small boats were trying to cross the channel.

What we do about refugees is very complex.

There are no easy solutions, and lots of different ideas floating around about what we should be doing. I’m not here to tell you what opinion you should have, but I want you to think about what part blame is playing in all this. What effect does it have on those who blame and those who are being blamed?

I don’t know if you’ve been following the news in America this week, but a shooting has created a perfect storm of blame. I was watching the BBC news and Clive Myrie had this to say: “There’s been anger and blame on both sides of the political divide”. How does this help? How is it making anything better?

Blame puts barriers between people. It divides, and deepens existing divisions. It others people. It's toxic, and it prevents us from coming together to explore creative and effective solutions to the problems we face. It causes people to live with fear and shame. And no-one becomes a better person from blaming someone else.

I want to say one thing really clearly. Jesus never blamed anyone. Not the Roman authorities; not the religious leaders; not the betrayer, Judas; and not the Roman soldiers who arrested him and nailed him to a cross. He called people to account; yes. He pointed out their wrong ways of thinking and behaving. In fact, that's what he was doing in

these lost and found stories. But he never placed blame on anyone.

We need to drop blame from our lives. Both blaming ourselves and blaming others. Not so much because it's sinful, but because it's harming us. And because we are seeking to be more like Jesus. And we are seeking the kind of kingdom on earth where people have empathy for each other, and work together to find good and just solutions, rather than seeking someone to blame.

I think we actually need healing from blame. The psychological effects may be deep seated. But before healing can happen, we need to face what

is happening to us. What kind of people are we because we blame others? Or blame ourselves?

There are no benefits from blame. It doesn't make anything better. But hope does. Love does.

Empathy does. A willingness to work together does. Faith in the unconditional love of a faithful God does. And this is the kind of kingdom we are part of, where both those who are blamed and those who are blaming are being searched for by God and brought home.

A prayer

Jesus lover of my soul

I know what it is to be blamed, and yet you never blame me.

I know what it is to blame, yet you seek out those I blame.

You opened wide your arms for us on the cross, for all of us.

Help us to forgive others. Help us to forgive ourselves.

And help us to walk free of blame and shame as we follow you so very imperfectly, knowing that you will always, always, seek us out and bring us home.

Amen.