Cultural Background to the Parable of the Lost Sheep

Shepherds were not considered good people in the culture of Jesus’ day. They lived outside in the fields, they were considered wild and uncivilised. They couldn’t participate in the religious life of the community and were considered ‘unclean’.

Jesus is therefore being provocative when he says to the Pharisees « Which of YOU having a hundred sheep ». He is making an indirect attack on their religious regulations and their consideration of shepherds (and by extension the other proscribed trades) as unclean.

As he tells it, Jesus makes clear that the shepherd is responsible for the loss - he has lost a sheep, by his own negligence. In the culture of the day a shepherd had to find the sheep and bring it back dead or alive - in order to prove to the community that he had not sold it.

A hundred sheep is a large flock and it is unlikely that these would all belong to one person. Probably the shepherd owns some of them and the others belong to members of his extended family. This explains why the loss is a communal loss and the joy at finding the lost sheep is also a communal joy.

When a sheep gets lost it lies down and bleats continuously but will refuse to budge. It will have to be physically carried back to the flock. Only when it sees its flock will the sheep move again of its own accord.

Finding a lost sheep is not considered too difficult. They don't wander very far or very fast, they make a lot of noise when they are lost, and they are too heavy for predators to drag very far. So finding the sheep - either alive or dead - is expected. Therefore the shepherd keeps looking “until he finds it”. There is no question of failure for a diligent shepherd.

When the shepherd finds the sheep he rejoices - but this is only part of the process of restoration - the finding must be followed by the carrying of the sheep the long way back to the flock. Yet the shepherd “joyfully carries it home”. He accepts the burden of restoration with joy.

Peasant shepherds bring the flock back to the village in the evening, to the protection of a closed courtyard. Also shepherds mostly worked in pairs or threes. So when one shepherd goes off to look for the lost sheep the remaining sheep are brought home safely by the other shepherds.

The lost sheep’s return is a source of joy for the whole community and not just the shepherd.

There is a joy in finding and a second joy in restoration.

The Pharisees and religious leaders are being criticised by Jesus for their ‘shepherding’ of the people. They don’t share his joy in the finding and the restoration of the ‘sinners’ - the lost sheep - that Jesus spends his time with. Jesus seems to be saying “The shepherd sought the lost. I seek the lost and so should you!”

We are told that the lost sheep is safely brought home. Those sheep who have not wandered off - the 99 - we aren’t specifically told where they are. If they represent the ‘righteous’, the good-living, religious people, there is an irony here. We don’t know how heaven feels about them, but we do know that the lost sinner who has been restored is a source of great joy.

The lost sheep does nothing to prompt the shepherd to look for him, other than get lost. Repentance (turning away from sinful behaviour and turning towards God) is therefore a response to the action of the shepherd, not a precondition for it. Lost sheep are loved and sought simply for being lost. Any change in their behaviour is a response to the loving and costly action of the shepherd.