

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

11th September 2022

There was a woman who had ten silver coins. That's today's Gospel story.

Today, it happens, we are remembering a woman who *was* a silver coin. Who was a face on a stamp. A woman whose life gathered together histories and lives and a sense of who we are. We are remembering, with gratitude, and bewilderment, and affection, someone who has always been there even if we never met her. We have lost something.

And here we are with a Gospel story about losing something. A story of a woman who had ten silver coins.

In her long life, and her long reign, Queen Elizabeth has been so defining a figure for us that perhaps we have stopped noticing that she was queen in an unusual way. She exercised power in an unusual way. Look at celebrities being glossy, and politicians posing as strong, and you begin to see the differences. We have been familiar with this for so long that we have forgotten that it's not usual to be capable of holding all kinds of power, for decades, as a down-to-earth woman with a sensible handbag and a sense of humour. It was perfectly believable – you remember that lovely film of the Queen having tea with Paddington Bear, the introduction to the Platinum Jubilee Concert? it was perfectly believable that in that handbag she did keep a marmalade sandwich. And it is almost unbelievable that someone in her position would have been happy to make that film.

Unless it was really for marmalade sandwiches, it was never clear why the Queen carried a handbag. But the handbag is what I would like to think about alongside the Gospel story of the woman with the ten silver coins. Nine, rather, because she's lost one. The story is about how she finds it.

The woman with the ten silver coins is an unlikely hero for a story. The man with a hundred sheep does much better, and gets to be pictured in stained-glass windows looking for the one lost sheep. But nobody makes a stained-glass window of a woman moving the furniture to find a lost coin. She is an unheroic hero.

So unheroic that it makes you start to ask about the story. Is this the usual kind of story? What is the point of it? Does the story exist to show how heroic the hero is? Surely something more dramatic should happen than just moving the furniture. At the very least the coin could be stolen by an evil monster behind the sofa, and the woman could slay the monster, heroically. But it's not that kind of story.

The writer Ursula le Guin said that she could never really get on with that kind of story, or with the storybook kind of hero. The kind of hero who goes out with a spear and slays monsters. No, she said, the point when her own art began to make sense to her was when she stopped thinking of heroism as that kind of big egotistical display. She thought differently about what the heart of the story could be; just gathering things, she said, and

putting them in a bag. Not going out with a spear and a sword and making a great expedition of it. Just gathering things and putting them in a bag.

Very often, when you think of it, Jesus tells that other kind of story, where things are just gathered in. Stories of the kingdom where, essentially, things are gathered into a bag. Fish in a net, a huge variety of fish. Sheep in a fold. Treasure buried in a field, seeds in the earth, wheat in the harvest. It's unheroic. It's not storybook. It's not the Holy Grail, it's flour in the mixing bowl. The small change of the kingdom. Ten silver coins.

I say 'just gathered' as if it was easy. But of course sometimes things refuse to be gathered. There was a woman who had ten silver coins but she has lost one. She loses one and she looks for it and then she switches on the light and looks for it and then she moves the furniture and looks for it and then she turns the whole house upside down and looks for it and finds it. And then she holds a party.

Likewise, there was a man who had a hundred sheep. He didn't keep them in a bag. Perhaps, if he had any sense, they were in a sheepfold. But one was missing. So the story is that one is lost, and he leaves the ninety-nine other sheep in the wilderness, telling them to stay still and be good, and goes and hunts for the lost one and finds it and brings it home and then he holds a party.

We tend to focus on the moment of finding. We tend to feel that should be a moment of crisis in a great heroic expedition. A storybook moment. But no: this is the other kind of story. The kind where things are just gathered in. It isn't dramatic, it's patient. It isn't heroic, it's persistent. Patiently, undramatically, unheroically, we are found. The point of the story is the party.

Think again about Queen Elizabeth, with her handbag. She saw seventy years, ninety-six years, of huge changes. But the way she exercised power was in countless moments of small change. Countless instances of time spent with slightly overwhelmed people, making them feel recognised. Opening a sewage works on a cold day in the Midlands. She was not a storybook queen or a heroic queen, except that this is the different kind of heroism. She was a queen over and over again in welcoming someone, smiling at someone, making them feel found. Over and over again, gathering things together, histories and moments and lives and a sense of who we are. With a sensible handbag to gather them in.

These unheroic stories Jesus tells about the kingdom, parables, stories about fish and sheep and tidying the house and all the rest of it – stories about gathering things – these are stories about what God is like. The point of the story is not the heroism of God. No monsters get slain. The point is the party. If we wander off into the wilderness or get lost down the back of the sofa, God will come and look for us, and find us, and then hold a party.

Not an inquiry into what we wandered off to do. Not an inspection to see precisely how much dust and fluff from the back of the sofa we still have about our person. A party. God is pleased to see you, says Jesus, controversially. God loves you. There is no inquiry, no inspection, no exam – I am sorry but this is just what God is like – there is not even an extended period of probation. You are already loved. If once you were lost, now you are found.

God gathers us in. God gathers us into community, into possibility, into life in God, into the infinite tiny graces that I have been calling the small change of the kingdom. God is like a good shepherd. God is like a woman with a handful of silver coins, each of them a tiny everyday grace.

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