

Withywood Church

The Withywood Centre, Queen's Road, Bristol, BS13 8QA

10:30am Sunday 14 September 2025

Lectionary:

Exodus 32:7-14;

Psalm 51:1-10;

1 Timothy 1:12-17;

Luke 15:1-10

SERMON

It's easy, given the doom and gloom, in the world to become pessimistic about life. As we've already mentioned, there is conflict across the world, questionable behaviours amongst politicians here and elsewhere, violence on our streets, and those espousing hatred among those in our society.

Maybe that's why we love to pick on small things to cheer us up.

The England football team won against Serbia this week – most people are happy to see a convincing win for the national team with their new coach.

Later today the women's rugby world cup will see England and Scotland play each other in the quarter finals at Ashton Gate. All eyes will be on the women to repeat the success of the England Women's football team in the Euros earlier this year.

Avon and Somerset Police posted earlier this week that this will be the first time their policing of the match will have an all female command team, and be predominantly female throughout. Showing as ACC Hall said "Across my 26-year-long career in a male-dominated field, I wanted to celebrate how far women have come in policing. We are working hard to improve the balance of genders in the force, especially at rank and in specialist teams. We believe if you can see it, you can believe it and by having so many brilliant women on this operation, it may encourage the next generation of young police officers." It offers hope to young women, traditionally under represented in this work.

Some may ask why it matters.

Who cares who is in charge as long as the job is done well and people are able to enjoy the event.

But there is something about recognising our gospel hope in this.

In 1 Timothy, we are given a story of an encounter with God that is a narrative of hope and joy. Paul was shown acceptance and mercy and love in a world which, somewhat like ours, was missing in both. Paul was a 'lost sheep' – violently persecuting Christians out of ignorance. Paul was considered one of the 'elite' of his time – a zealous Jewish leader who in seeking to persecute Christians, believed he was carrying out God's will. He

believed himself on of the 'good guys' – yet when the truth was revealed to him that he was in fact about as far from that as possible – he received mercy and acceptance.

One of these classic examples where God's love surprises us and accepts those we would reasonably consider beyond hope.

In acknowledging that;

“The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...” (1 Tim 1:15)

Paul promotes a message that no one is beyond God's love...

Elsewhere in Paul's writing he says;

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galations 3:28)

The message is that God's concern is for all – today we might expand this to say there is no longer male/female, black/white, cis/trans, gay/straight, British/foreigner, disabled/able bodied, fit/ill. It can even stretch as far as City/Rovers fans!!!!

In sending Jesus, God's mission is to demonstrate a radical inclusion – that was seen as strange in it's time – remember how often Jesus is criticised by the powerful of his day because of his tendency to spend time with those considered 'not worth it' – sinners and outcasts and even eats with them...

In our gospel reading we are shown an even more radical view of God's love.

Jesus compares the compassion of the shepherd who, having lost one of their hundred sheep, leaves the ninety-nine to go seek out the missing one.

Many years ago I took a group of young people to a theme park for the day. They were allowed free time to go around the park as they wished, provided they stayed in groups of at least three. At the end of the day we gathered everyone up on the coaches and did a head count. We were one child short. It didn't matter that in order to be missing that child had broken the rule to remain in a small group – what mattered was that they were missing and had to be found. Despite having responsibility for the two coach loads of kids, I had to leave them all with the others and head to guest services to organise a search. I discovered exactly how long it took to check every part of the park we were at. When we finally found the young girl, there was no anger at her disobedience – just relief that she was OK. No one ever considered saying 'oh well, we've got enough with the others, let's just go home'. The welfare of the missing one was of paramount importance.

This is how God feels about us. God rejoices over finding and redeeming the one who is missing, not because they don't care about those who don't need to be found, but because every single one matters.

How many of us have lost something and gone into a degree of panic looking for it. The item itself could be relatively insignificant, or could be a major issue – but we put everything aside while we look for it.

In the second story, of the woman who lost one of her ten coins, it has been suggested that these coins represented everything she had (or was maybe her dowry without which she would be unable to marry – a serious issue in that time). She would have been frantic, searching everywhere, but then so relieved when it is found that she throws a party for friends and neighbours to celebrate finding it.

God rejoices over those who are lost who return to the fold.

How open are we as the church to this? Some years back there was a homeless man who would, from time to time, turn up at various churches in the area. He had frequently been drinking and could therefore sometimes be a bit disruptive. I'm sad to say that due to this a number of churches in the area took to locking their outer doors at the start of services to prevent him gaining access. Thankfully, the church I was at at the time chose to take a different approach and ensure that when he turned up someone would move to sit with him, make sure he knew where we were in the service, help him find the hymns in the hymnbook. If he played his mouth organ in the hymns they chose to accept it as his contribution. If he became disruptive he was quietly invited to pop out back for a cuppa, and a second person would join them to see that all was well. Where appropriate he was given food if needed.

Who lived their faith in the 'Jesus' way?

Are we, as a church, willing to stand with our doors open to proclaim 'All are welcome here?' – no matter what our society might say? Are we willing to be radically inclusive in the same way that Jesus was/is?

Will we live out the faith we proclaim in a real way in our lives and our communities – even if we are frightened will we still say "Amen"?

- Exodus – God threatens to destroy because of Golden Calf worship, Moses dissuades by reminding God of promise to Abraham, Isaac and Israel... (and that God would look inconsistent to the Egyptians)
- Probably written in Paul's name, but after his death – 'Paul' confesses, how bad he was but "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..." (1 Tim 1:15) Message No One is beyond God's love...
- Gospel – Parables of lost and found – 99 sheep left to go find the missing one... Rejoicing when the lost is returned... Woman losing one of her 10 coins, rejoicing in finding it...

First two of three stories (third being Prodigal Son), each time value of what is lost increases.

If these stories are read as reflecting God's passion to reach out to sinners, it tells us that God values them and longs to find them even before they have turned back to the divine reality. God's grace searches us out. God does not wait for us to come looking, but actively seeks to find us and bring us back into the community where we belong.

Life is somewhat dark at the moment. Bombing in Qatar, Russian drones shot down over Poland, more murky details in the Epstein files and the ongoing rise across the world of the far right – even in our own country, with a large rally in London yesterday.

God calls us, as Christians to stand up for God's way. But we need to recognise that being Christians is now about the easy option.

One of my pet hates are those Christian speakers who say "Come to Jesus and everything will be wonderful" – God NEVER promised us that, but we were promised that "I will be with you always, even to the end of time."

This reading is by Adrian Plass and sums up this call and how we might reply... It's a little old now, so please excuse that its language is less inclusive than we might prefer, but the message is more important;

*When I became a Christian I said, Lord, now fill me in,
Tell me what I'll suffer in this world of shame and sin.
He said, Your body may be killed, and left to rot and stink,
Do you still want to follow me? I said, Amen! – I think.
I think Amen, Amen I think, I think I say Amen,
I'm not completely sure, can you just run through that again?
You say my body may be killed and left to rot and stink,
Well, yes, that sounds terrific, Lord, I say Amen – I think.*

*But, Lord, there must be other ways to follow you, I said,
I really would prefer to end up dying in my bed.
Well, yes, he said, you could put up with sneers and scorn and spit,
Do you still want to follow me? I said, Amen! – a bit.
A bit Amen, Amen a bit, a bit I say Amen,
I'm not completely sure, can you just run through that again?
You say I could put up with sneers and scorn and spit,
Well, yes, I've made my mind up, and I say Amen! – a bit.*

*Well I sat back and thought a while, then tried a different ploy,
Now, Lord, I said, the Good Book says that Christians live in joy.
That's true, he said, you need the joy to bear the pain and sorrow,
So do you still want to follow me? I said, Amen! – tomorrow.
Tomorrow, Lord, I'll say it then, that's when I'll say Amen,
I need to get it clear, can I just run through that again?
You said that I will need the joy, to bear the pain and sorrow,
Well, yes, I think I've got it straight, I'll say, Amen – tomorrow.*

*He said, Look, I'm not asking you to spend an hour with me,
A quick salvation sandwich and a cup of sanctity,
The cost is you, not half of you, but every single bit.
Now tell me, will you follow me? I said, Amen! – No – I quit.
I'm very sorry, Lord, I said, I'd like to follow you,
But I don't think religion is a manly thing to do.
He said, Forget religion then, and think about my Son,
And tell me if you're man enough to do what he has done.*

*Are you man enough to see the need, and man enough to go,
Man enough to care for those whom no one wants to know,
Man enough to say the thing that people hate to hear,
To battle through Gethsemane in loneliness and fear.
And listen! Are you man enough to stand it at the end,
The moment of betrayal by the kisses of a friend,
Are you man enough to hold your tongue, and man enough to cry,
And when the nails break your body – are you man enough to die?
Man enough to take the pain, and wear it like a crown,
Man enough to love the world and turn it upside down,
Are you man enough to follow me, I ask you once again.
I said, Oh Lord, I'm frightened, but I also said Amen.
Amen, Amen, Amen, Amen,,
I said, Lord, I'm so frightened, but I also said, Amen*

(Adrian Plass)