

Sermon,
Sunday 14th September 2025, Kinross,
Alex Johnson.

I wonder if there is something that you have really worked hard for? Afterall, there are lots of things we give up on pretty easily. For example, my high jump career didn't survive past one fateful P5 sport's day. But there are other things that for some reason become wrapped up in our sense of self. Things that we want to succeed in, things that we are motivated to achieve. What has it been for you? What has driven you forward in life through the challenges and pains? What is it that matters to you?

This is a dangerous question to ask because our passions can be misplaced or our dreams can be left unfulfilled. I might be opening a can of worms for you. Though I hope that asking about your passions is a joyful question, I acknowledge it can be more complicated than that, for passion can break us as much as shape us. Yet, as you think back to that time of great determination or that sense of purpose that informs your life, however it may have turned out, can you reconnect with that feeling, that drive, that desire? That sense of being willing to take a step in the pursuit of a goal. Whether they ended up being the one or the one that got away, whether you passed or you failed, whether you could rest on a job well done or still have unfinished business, do you remember that commitment which spurred you on? Do you remember that fantasy, that dream that felt like it was worth pursuing?

Well...this is a sermon that is not about you but about God. That feeling that I have tried to remind you of, is a feeling that God knows well. These parables that Jesus told have many characters, sheep and coins, friends, neighbours, and angels, but they are driven forward by the characters of shepherd and housekeeper. Characters that reflect the love of God, a love which is not sitting back, but is a love that steps into the world because people matter. Just as the identity of a shepherd is wrapped up in protecting the sheep, just as a housekeeper takes pride in managing the household, so the identity of God is invested in people. Not just humanity, or creation, but individual people. You and me.

I wonder if you see God in that way? As more than a neutral bystander but as someone with skin in the game. Someone for whom each potential outcome is not weighted the same, but instead wants to shape the world in a particular direction. Just as you did as you went after that degree or promotion or whatever it was that came to mind earlier. What is it like to imagine God that way?

For there is a temptation to remove God from our immediate understanding of the world. To perhaps understand God as a politician, interested in the structuring of society according to their own values. Or perhaps as an artist, demonstrating beauty and showing the potential of creation. These views of God give space for things to be wrong with the world, they protect God from the accusation that he is not doing enough. Yet, through identifying God as a shepherd and housekeeper, these parables suggest that these noble tasks of politician and artist find their place beneath the desire to simply welcome people back into a relationship with God. That in the kingdom of God the lion lies next to the lamb, its angelic choirs sing beautifully, because at its heart there is a God who is committed to each of us. This analogy of a shepherd repeats and repeats throughout the Biblical witness as an illustration of the heart of God. A heart bent on nurturing, sustaining, and protecting those in its care.

So these pictures of God prevent us from abstracting the divine out of our everyday lives. Instead, we understand God as deeply involved and invested in the comings and goings of our lives. What shepherd is disinterested in their flock? What housekeeper is neglectful of their household? The arenas of humanity and the arenas of divinity overlap, our agency and God's agency is played out within the same space.

The understanding of God within these parables does a lot of heavy lifting in our tradition. It means that God intends good things for this universe, creation is in some sense secure within the love of God. It highlights salvation as an act of God more than anything else, placing our own lives within a divine context. It sustains an ethic of hospitality, in which the distinction between wanted and unwanted people is eroded as God seeks after every single human being.

But as we have already seen they also raise many questions. What actions and events within our lives can we actually attribute to God? How does the unfailing love of God interact with my own wishes, perhaps my own desire to remain lost? Why has this love not won? And you'll know by now that I feel the weight of these questions as much as you do. Yet, I feel called today to keep this sermon focussed on God and not on ourselves. No one has been able to answer those questions. The question of discernment is always subjective. The question of free will is a philosophical mine field. The problem of evil seemingly unresolvable.

But we are not being instructed on these matters today, not because they are unimportant, but because however we try to understand them we do so within this understanding of the active love of God towards us. We wrestle with them within the offer of friendship that Jesus gives to those around him. We lament the state of the world while joining with the song of angels, declaring that our God saves.

We are here by the love of God, which searches every ravine, lifts every sofa cushion, that we might be restored to communion with him. This love is still out there. Still in the streets of this town, still, through all the cycles of history, following its passion for each one of us.

So do you remember that feeling? That passion that inspired you to take a risk? That pursuit of something you felt to be of the utmost importance? I doubt it came with guarantees. I doubt it came neatly packaged. But you also knew there was something there, some goodness that you wanted to experience. God knows that feeling, he holds his hand out and wonders if you might just be after the same thing.