

September 15, 2019 Lost In Space Homily: In the early days of space travel, scientists at the command center of Cape Canaveral had some valid concerns about the safety of American astronauts in the depths of outer space. First, if the space craft were ever to be disabled or the means of communicating with the crew suspended or permanently lost, the strong likelihood is that lives would be in mortal danger. In addition, if the space craft were to veer off course and wander aimlessly in outer space, recovery efforts would, in the end, prove futile, and the early pioneers of space travel would then be “lost in space”, placing their lives in mortal danger. In the days of my youth one of the popular television dramas was based on such a scenario. Perhaps you remember the series, “Lost in Space”, or the song, “Rocket Man”, by the English recording artist Elton John. Recall the words of the song: “I miss the earth so much, it’s lonely out in space”. A successful mission ends in a safe return home!

In today’s gospel (Lk. 15:1-10), both parables underscore that something of great value is lost. In the parable of the lost sheep, one sheep of a flock of one hundred is lost in the wilderness. The sheep has no one to protect or guide it. In addition, the animal is exposed to grave danger: the excessive heat of the desert and the prey of wild animals.

Clearly, the lost sheep in the well known parable of Jesus is a symbol of the human being who has gone astray. His life is one of existential loneliness and despair. The Shepherd is a symbol of God who is in search of man. He leaves behind the glory of eternity in order to go in search of his lost creation. In doing so, he takes an enormous risk. He leaves behind the other ninety-nine sheep. As we learn in John’s gospel, the Good Shepherd willingly lays down his life for his sheep. His concern for his flock costs him his life! “I know my own sheep and my sheep know me... as the Father knows me and I know the Father... and I lay down my life for the sheep.” (Jn.10:14)

Why does the shepherd fret over one single sheep? Simply put, it is because God does not want one of his children to be lost. Indeed, there is great joy in finding what was lost. Should we at all be surprised that all sorts of “findings” pervade the gospels: the shepherds and Magi find an infant in the manger, Philip tells Nathanael he has found the Messiah, Mary Magdalene finds the gardener she wasn’t looking for, and the prodigal Son in the best known parable of Jesus, in the words of his father, “...was lost and is found”. (Lk.15:32)

In the subterranean cemeteries outside of Rome, known as the catacombs, where many Christians hid during a time of persecution, this scene of the Shepherd dominates its walls. The shepherd is depicted with a lamb upon his shoulders. He is a savior who goes in search of sinners and who leads the faithful into green pastures. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, never tires of seeking us out and returning us to his flock.

According to reputable polling data, the flock of many of our churches has suffered a significant loss in numbers over the last generation. Too many have strayed, and the likelihood is that many will not return. Do we realize that we are “lost” without God? Can we truly live a meaningful life in isolation from the community of believers? Is “going it alone” the best option in life? But even for those of us who are active in church and gladly follow the Shepherd wherever he chooses to lead us, there exist endless opportunities to stray from the flock and lose ourselves in the deserts of this life. At one time or another, we all stray from the flock and abandon the Shepherd.

The fifteenth chapter of Luke’s gospel lays stress on God’s incredible mercy. Our Lord bids us rejoice whenever a sinner is converted and returns home. “Rejoice with me! He (the shepherd) cries. I have found my lost sheep.” (Lk.15:6)

For the sake of his name, the Shepherd guides us in the right path. “Near restful waters he leads us.” (Ps.23) He truly cares for us!

Amen!