

IPCA Europe Rome conference 2016

Closing address, Thursday, March 3: Luke 15 1-7 – David Buick (France)

When I was asked to comment on a Bible passage to close this conference, my mind immediately went to the parable of the lost sheep. On the face of it, this is one of the easier parables to interpret, because Jesus himself gives the explanation: there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than 99 who do not need to repent. And if you are a prison chaplain, you are probably already highly motivated by that idea. You are drawn to “seek and to save that which was lost”, naturally drawn to the one rather than the 99; the forgotten minority of those in prison.

But like most parables, I believe we can learn still more from this story.

Firstly, in the context of this parable there is another sort of minority. Jesus tells the parable in response to the criticism of the religious authorities of the day. Numerically speaking they were a minority – the minority in power. Today we would call them the “one percenters” compared to the 99%. They exercise influence and control over many others, and Jesus was addressing them in this parable. In our prisons we are faced with various “one percenters”: the director; the senior prison officers; the union representatives; prisoners who control the lives of others. Just as Jesus responded to the wrong judgement and oppression of the powerful minority, part of our role as chaplains is not to be intimidated by these various “one percenters”, speaking truth to power when necessary, and resisting the temptation simply to blend in with the status quo.

Not only that, we are in some ways in a position of power with regard to our flock. When I visit inmates, I try to go as an equal, man to man; but I go with a key, and when I’m tired of someone I can simply lock the door on them. The Bible has strong words to say about “bad shepherds”. We need to be careful not to become religious oppressors, part of the 1% ourselves.

Let us turn now to the more usual understanding of minority; the “lost sheep” of this parable. Who is this lost sheep? We might immediately think of the inmates we seek to minister to. But let us stay with ourselves a moment longer. It is my perception that we as chaplains are often a minority. Often the reaction to our ministry is “I could never do that”. Sometimes – even from our churches – the reaction is “why do you waste your time on them?” Or more provocatively “what about the victims?” We have to admit we are a rather strange species and we are often solitary. In fact we could have had a conference called “chaplains in prison – inside, isolated, and alone.” Sometimes our minority calling can give us an inflated sense of saintliness; sometimes the emotional burdens we carry can overwhelm us. We need to ensure we benefit from good pastoral care and that we provide it for the colleagues we may have responsibility for.

Then there are of course the minorities actually in prison. This conference has explored the question of who these minorities are and what our response to them should be. Like so much about prison, it is a paradox. Elisabetta Zamparutti reminded us that minorities outside prison are often majorities inside prison. Francesco Spano reminded us that minorities are not fixed but constantly changing. Mauro Palma contrasted ‘well-established minorities’ with ‘grey area’ minorities. I haven’t had time to process the implications of everything I’ve heard, but one takeaway for me is that we need to exercise a great deal of discernment to be effective in “finding the *really* lost sheep”.

And to be a little provocative on that subject, I think we have to exercise special discernment when it comes to these so-called “well-established minorities” or what Mauro Palma called “psychological minorities”: people who not only rightfully assert their identity but also make an identity out of their

oppression and victimhood. There is such a thing as negative discrimination. As we seek to reach out to minorities, I believe we need to be careful not to be manipulated. "Some sheep do not want to be found".

I was never very good at maths at school, and perhaps that's why I like what I call "Kingdom of God" maths – the maths of the miracles of feeding multitudes in the Bible, where the less food there is to start with, the more there is to be shared and the more there is left over at the end.

What is the Kingdom of God maths in this parable? It is not the natural maths of $99 > 1$, where the majority is the most important. Nor is it the worldly maths of $1 > 99$, where the 1% rule or the vocal minority eclipse the common good. I believe it is $1 = 99$. Yes, the focus is on the sheep that is lost. But in the parallel parable of the lost coin, the woman did not throw away the nine she had just because she found the one. And while we may have the impression that the shepherd simply abandoned the 99, I don't think that's the case. My future son-in-law's father was a shepherd in the Middle East and I checked this story with him. He said that the shepherd would leave the sheep outdoors, but in a large enclosure. The shepherd did not simply attend to the lost sheep, but brought it back to be part of the flock. As we care for minorities, we should not lose sight of the bigger picture – the "silent majority" of our inmates; the churches and other faith communities that cannot come with us into prison but support our work; and indeed civil society as a whole, for whom I believe we are an important witness and indeed ambassadors for some valuable lessons learned in prison that can apply to society at large.

Giannino Piana spoke of "peaceful coexistence" and a "recognising society" that nurtures an "identity that allows us to build dialogue". Mike Kavanagh talked about "retaining links with the faith community outside". Just as our goal for prisoners is to facilitate their return to the community – resettlement – our aim for the various minorities – the "ones" we encounter – should be for them to be integrated with the "99" – the wider community. And indeed, for them to enrich that community. To use Paolo Naso's memorable phrase, the aim is not for that community to be a "reception centre" but a "house of cultures". The logic of the Kingdom of God is all about tiny minorities affecting the entire community for good. Our parable closes with the lost sheep – the minority inside, isolated, and alone – being found; restored to its rightful place. And best of all, it being found is an invitation to everyone; an invitation to rejoice. As we return to our local situations to face the challenges of minorities and many other pressures, may we as people of faith, and as Elisabetta Zamparutti reminded us, "hope against hope", and in a troubled world, look for opportunities to rejoice, and for our minorities to make that rejoicing even greater.