

Lost and Found – a search founded in love

Luke 15:1-10; 1 tIM 1 V 12-17; jER 4 V11-28

Today's gospel reading is all about being lost and found. This is a subject very close to my own heart . I have a Phd in losing things. Reading glasses is my specialist subject - I normally leave a pair in each church that I visit !

Our Gospel reading this morning is part of a trilogy of Jesus parables that have been gathered together by Luke in his gospel which are all about losing and finding things. Today's reading includes the first two parts of that trilogy the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. But if the lectionary reading had allowed us to read on we would have also had found the parable of the lost son making up that complete series. All three stories include the theme of being lost but equally, and reassuringly for us, of being found. We will come back to this second point in a minute.

Jesus is telling the story to an audience of people who certainly would have classed themselves and been classed by others as being truly 'lost'. They were the tax gatherers they were the sinners, sinners being commonly assumed to mean prostitutes. In Jewish opinion you could not get much lower than being a taxman. Seen to be in league with their Roman masters and swindling their own countrymen in the process. They were outcasts of their nation, truly lost people. And you certainly would not wish to broadcast the fact that you were sitting down to eat with common prostitutes.

But Jesus had particularly sought them out and had chosen to eat with them. He was to bring them a message of hope that in their lost and rejected state they were loved, sought out and welcomed by Father God. They had been found , they were redeemed.

Now one might commonly assume that this message of being lost and found was specifically directed at his eating companions but in truth the message was really being addressed at the Pharisees who were looking on with disdain. If we had tracked back into the previous chapter of this gospel we would have read about another meal taken by Jesus in very different surroundings and to a different audience. We would have read ' One Sabbath, Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, and he was being carefully watched.'

You see the Pharisees , the religious elite of the time, were looking to trip Jesus up with their knowledge of the law and their loaded questions but Jesus had managed to tie their arguments in knots. And so at the beginning of this chapter we see that they had resorted to *grumbling* and in other translations it says *sneering* at Jesus.

You see the Pharisees honestly believed that they were the good guys here, the righteous ones. They thought they were the found of the parables, the squeaky clean and sin free, one of the 99 safely gathered

in. But Jesus in the three parables was directing the stories at them . They were the lost subjects in the parables not the sinners or the tax gatherers and prostitutes who had already been found by Jesus.

The question for us this morning is who do we relate to in these parables?

When I first came to realise that the stories were directed at the Pharisees my own conscience was pricked. I moved last year to the centre of an English provincial town. And like many towns of its size it is a magnet to the homeless and the destitute many who sleep rough and beg on street corners. But there was I, as it were the 21st century Pharisee, looking on and *grumbling* and *sneering* saying things like ‘how can they be begging for food whilst affording to smoke and have a bottle of alcohol continually in their hand. Why do they always have a dog with them to play on the sympathy of our dog loving nation? Why were they not out doing an honest days work in a town where there were still jobs to be had?’ And then one day I was bought up short and very humbled as I watch a well dressed couple of my own vintage stop bend down to one of the beggars on the street , share a story and laughter with him and then to leave him with a hug and a kiss. I asked myself as I looked on like the Pharisees who was the lost and the found in this scenario?

Or perhaps as we re-read this passage we might relate our selves to the position of the tax gatherers and sinners knowing that we are lost and yet to be found? Mark Yaconelli writing in his book ‘Wonder, fear and longings’ writes:

‘Most of us have been trained to keep agony and pain in our lives secret. People dress up for church greet one another with serene and pleasant faces, and keeping *things neat and orderly in worship*. *Church often feels like a place for pretending, a place for hiding all the mess and anguish of our human living*’

Does this ring true for you as it so often does for me?

But the good news of these parables is that we have one who sees our ***anguish and messed up lives*** and despite this still seeks us out, pursues us relentlessly like that good shepherd in the parable.Or like the widow who will not rest until she finds that lost coin or like the father of the prodigal son never ceasing to look out for his return.Yes the reassuring message of this passage is that we have one who loves us all so much, that he will leave the other 99 safely at home and search us out. Us the ones he made to be an individual. The unique one given a finger print designed for each one of us. The one he knew and loved even before our birth. Nothing will stop him pursuing us in our lives until he finds us and **we find him**.

Now at this point I had first thought that we should move on to consider our role as his disciples in searching out, by word and deed, the lost of this world.

But I sensed the Lord saying ‘no stay awhile with this truth . Take a moment longer to explore and savour just how real, just how immense, how unfathomable my love truly is. Tell them that I love them’.

And so friends I revisited that story again of the lost sheep. Picture if you will that lamb. The rebel of the flock, something of a ‘jack the lad’ type . Rejecting all warnings of his mother to stay close by and not stray into dangerous territory. The grass looked greener to him higher up the crag and off he wandered. Now the

the shepherd, father God, could have been content with the 99 safely gathered in but each lamb, as I just said, is so special to Him - so unique so individual not a number but a name each hair on our head counted. His love is so great that he walked the dangerous track to rescue us even though it necessitate Jesus walking the track to the cross.

And His love is **tenacious**. Tenacious like that of the widow. Nothing is going to stop or deflect him in his efforts to find that which is lost. And His love is **patient**. Patient like the old man walking daily to the hill top to search the horizon for the chance of seeing, forgiving and welcoming the prodigal son back home. Just as Paul spoke of in his letter to Timothy that we read this morning God's patience is 'immense'.

And so friends we see through these parables that **we have been the lost** in these stores, lost within our sinful lives, but relentlessly pursued and yes found by a self sacrificing , tenaciousness and patient God, and then, and then loved! What is there left for us to do? Simply to respond with changed joyful lives and then, have you noticed all the three parables have a similarly end, they all go out and celebrate the find.

Let the celebrations begin!