

The cost of retrieving the lost (Luke 15:1-10)

Some of the gospel readings during these last few weeks have been particularly difficult. So what a delight this morning, to have one of those gems unique to Luke. That is not to say that it is not challenging; far from it!

Luke is not sparse on unique treasures. Some of the Christmas stories, present in Luke alone, contain riches which have contributed to the liturgy: Benedictus, Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis. The story of Jesus' calling Zacchaeus out of his sycamore tree to be welcomed into his home is only found in Luke as, also, is the story of the Good Samaritan. We could go on; there is Luke's focus in stories and practice on prayer, his emphasis on Jesus' concern for women, with pushing the boundaries of equality and justice, and much more besides.

Luke 15 is a truly remarkable chapter with its entire content absorbed in three stories which Jesus told about things, thought to be lost, which were found: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. The lost coin and the lost son are in Luke alone, and whilst the lost sheep also features in Matthew, in Luke the detail is a little different.

What I want to do this morning is first look at the context, what was it which prompted the stories in the first place? secondly, look at the stories themselves and, thirdly, the culmination; how the stories conclude.

The context is Jesus being got at! There is grumbling in the background. Tax-collectors and sinners, those who we might say at best sat lightly to religion and the church, so to speak, of their day were *listening* to Jesus and Jesus was not only welcoming them but actually *eating* with them. Those doing the grumbling were the scribes and Pharisees, the respectable people, those who thought themselves to be faithful and religious – and who didn't think much of the others. It is against this background that we are drawn into stories of cost, of discovery and of redemption.

Rosamund Herklots wrote some seventy hymns but is only remembered for one. She wrote it in June 1966. She had been digging out weeds in her nephew's garden. Struggling with some difficulty to extract the deep, tenacious roots, a parallel dawned on her between the invasive, smothering nature of the weeds with the entrenched resentment, bitterness, hatred which can stunt our own spiritual growth and blight the lives of others too. Beware of becoming scribes and Pharisees!

Her hymn, originally published under the title 'The Unforgiving Heart' begins:

'Forgive our sins as we forgive', you taught us Lord to pray.

It is a sobering thought that when we pray The Lord's Prayer, the request for forgiveness is conditional. 'Forgive our sins, *in the same way* that we forgive others.' There are many hymns which focus on God's forgiveness, but few which cast a spotlight on our forgiveness of others. Note the second verse:

How can your pardon reach and bless
the unforgiving heart
that broods on wrongs, and will not let
old bitterness depart.

Jesus was addressing the fundamental disconnect between two groups of people and it seems that scribes and Pharisees, by putting a label on people, had lost sight of their value and potential as people. But we should be careful; it is just as easy to label scribes and Pharisees too! So, to the stories themselves which speak to us of God, and God's very different approach and perspective, and which, in consequence, should nuance our attitude too.

Walking our Labrador, Barney, round the back of Braithwaite How each morning, when there are sheep, I sometimes count them. It is somehow strangely satisfying when there is a round number. Similarly here, one hundred sheep is a complete, round number, ninety-nine isn't; ten coins is a complete, round number, nine isn't. Those listening to Jesus would have grasped that. But it is evident here and elsewhere that Jesus' concern is that not one should be lost unnecessarily. That is not to say they won't be, that is neither within our knowledge or gift, but it *is* God's will.

But what of the nature of the 'lostness'? It is hardly possible to blame the sheep. It might have got left behind or strayed in search of a morsel of grass; highly likely there was precious little of it about. It might have slipped down a crevasse. And if we are uncertain about the sheep, the coin certainly could not be blamed. People have different opportunities or lack of them, life intervenes, but in these stories Jesus' focus is not to apportion blame, far from it. Instead we are being drawn to look at the potential tragedy of lostness and the nature of the seeker, the one who is feeling the loss.

In the Old Testament, alongside Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34 is the definitive chapter about sheep and shepherds. In Ezekiel 34, God, despairing of the wanton inadequacy of the shepherds, both secular and religious, decides to take over: 'This is what the Lord God says: "Now I myself shall take thought for my sheep and go in search of them and rescue them. I shall feed them on good grazing-ground, they will rest in good pasture. I myself will tend my flock. I will search for the lost, recover the straggler, bandage the injured, strengthen the sick, leave the healthy and strong to play, and give my flock their proper food."' (Ezekiel 34:11-16 extracts). But remember, shepherds were common people doing often dirty work and with far too many demands made on them by their sheep! They could never hope to observe all the religious niceties of their day, so how could they be respectable? Jesus, echoing Ezekiel, is therefore employing daring imagery likening God to a shepherd.

In the second story, Jesus' imagery of God seeking out the lost is bolder still. Jesus likens God to a peasant woman taking a lamp, sweeping out her house, getting down on her hands and knees and searching each cobwebby corner; God the anxious woman obsessed with finding her lost coin to make her ten complete again. If we were to venture into the third story about the lost son, the thumbnail sketch of an aching father rushing, with undignified haste, to embrace his wayward son is equally daring.

Words are important. Language, pictures, ideas can either expand or diminish our understanding of what God is like. Jesus is evidently intent on expanding our perspective.

Brian Wren is one of the most imaginative and mind-stretching of contemporary hymn writers, (I note there are nine of his hymns in your hymn book). Following Jesus' example, he has one hymn which inverts, and therefore encourages expanding, our concepts of God, it begins:

Bring many names,
beautiful and good,
celebrate in parable and story,
holiness in glory,
living, loving God.

Here's a flavour:

Strong mother God,
working night and day,
planting all the wonders of creation,
setting each equation,
genius at play.

Subsequent verses respond similarly:

Warm father God, hugging every child...

Old aching God, grey with endless care...

Young, growing God, eager, on the move...

And the way in which all these notions are couched suggests a cost involved. What is not always considered in these stories is the trauma: the anguish of the shepherd, the distress of the old woman, the spurned love of the father; what that means to God and should mean to us.

In our second hymn by Stuart Townend we sang:

How deep the Father's love for us
how vast beyond all measure
that he should give his only Son
to make a wretch his treasure
how great the pain of searing loss
the Father turns his face away... Why?

Here, the anguish of the shepherd, the distress of the old woman, the spurned love of the father, culminates in the death of the Son and the suggestion is, it seems to me, that the Father turns his face away simply because he cannot bear to watch a moment longer.

The German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, put it this way: 'The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son. The grief of the Father is just as important as the death of the Son... It is the ...boundless love which proceeds from the grief of the Father and the dying of the Son and reaches forsaken humankind in order to create in them the possibility and the force of new life.' (Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* pp 243... 245)

The message in these stories is not just one of reaching out, of inclusivity, of never writing anyone off, it is also about cost, a cost which ultimately found its supreme expression in the cross.

But, finally, remember how each story ends. Once the lost is found and recovered, there is a party, a celebration. 'Come, rejoice with me, the lost is found'; ninety-nine has become one hundred, nine has become ten, the numbers are complete. The God of many guises has, at great cost, pulled it off again – and we are invited to listen, look, learn, and to do likewise.

And Jesus' punchline? 'There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than of ninety-nine who do not need to repent.' Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, who like me his praise should sing?' Thanks be to God.