

Before we hear the reading from Heather I want to add a few words of introduction. We're going to read an entire chapter from Luke's Gospel – chapter 15. In this chapter Jesus tells three parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the lost son – or the prodigal son. They are familiar stories to many of us – some of us will have heard or read them many times. It's sometimes difficult to listen afresh to familiar words – even stories that contain deep truths. As the Bible says: we have ears but we do not hear. So to help us listen more intently I thought I'd pose a couple of questions to ask ourselves as we listen to the reading.

Firstly – and this is the Desert Island Disks question - if you had to pick just one of the three which one would choose – or, in other words, which of the three is your favourite and why?

Secondly which story stands out as different from the other two? Which, if any, is the odd one out and why?

Thank you, Heather.

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I'm interested in our answers to the questions – and I don't believe there's a right or wrong answer to the questions.

POSE QUESTIONS – ASK PEOPLE TO RAISE THEIR HANDS TO INDICATE THEIR CHOICE

ASK IF ANYONE WANTS TO SHARE WHY?

Thank you.

So this morning, we're going to take a look at the stories Jesus told about an animal, a thing and a person that get lost and are found.

Firstly, did I mention that I went on a walk recently? If so I promise this is the last time I mention it! Seriously – I set out on my pilgrimage with the expectation that I would learn something about myself and God – some spiritual insight. I envisaged walking along in a meditative, thoughtful, prayerful state, ready for a flash of insight or inspiration. In anticipation I took with me a small notebook and kept it handy. To prompt my thinking I began to jot down some notes. And you have to remember before I read some of them out that I spent a lot of time walking the edges of ploughed fields and crossing ditches. So here's how they start:

“Rules of the Road” – I agree it sounds a little pompous.

1. Look where you're walking (profound).
2. Don't do two things at once – for example, walk and consult map or guide book. Result: trip or fall. If in doubt refer to Rule 1.

3. Small steps better than no steps.
4. Your walking stick (or pole as I learnt to call it) is your friend, your extra arm, your extra leg, your weapon, your digging and hacking tool.
5. Maps are helpful but be wary of misreading them. An example: I recall when Jane and Kevin joined me on the last day we discovered a small wood had moved which seemed odd because we knew exactly where we were and the wood shouldn't have been in that place. Of course we were wrong. But a lesson learned.

It gets less coherent after this ... and then I see that I've simply written the words "The LORD is my shepherd I shall not want; he maketh me to lie down ... he leadeth me in paths of righteousness ... " and so on.

The truth was I spent most of my time trying to work out the right path, getting lost and then trying to find the right path again. There wasn't much time for meditation. So I came to the conclusion that if there was any deep connection between my experience on the walk and my Christian life – then it was something to do with the reality of regularly getting lost and having to find my way back to the right path. I honestly wasn't expecting this – and I confess to being a little disappointed. God seemed to be drawing me back to the stories of the lost and found. I was disappointed (and ashamed) because I struggled to think that I could learn anything more from stories I'd heard dozens of times.

But in reflecting on these stories I have learned things afresh and I want to share them with you today. I say 'want to share with you' – but I think I should say it more strongly: 'I must share with you'.

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So we have three stories of Jesus: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. Why did Jesus tell these stories? He was addressing the mutterings of the religious leaders, concerned that he was hanging around with “tax collectors and sinners” – bad types. (As someone who has just joined the tax collecting authority I'm assured that in Jesus' time tax collectors did not enjoy the honourable reputation they do today!)

This picture is meant to show the situation. You can see the “sinners” gathered around to hear Jesus – as Luke describes. And to the side we see the Pharisees and teachers of the Law questioning Jesus: why are you amongst these kind of people? Why are you bothering with these types: the bad 'uns, the misfits, the outcasts? He responds to their mutterings by telling the three stories. Now as you can see from the picture, both the sinners and the teachers of the law heard his answer. So the stories had a message for both groups – so which ever group we think we're in - we need to listen because there's something in them for all of us.

My next question: why did Jesus tell three stories on the same theme? I think there are many possible reasons – and they may all be right. For one thing, there's an element of similarity and repetition which has the effect of reinforcing any messages they contain. It's like underlining something three times: a way of saying, this is very important; this is vital; this is essential. Listen once, listen twice – and listen again. Another reason is that Jesus can't get all the truth into one story – or he wanted to present the same truth from different perspectives. He does the same thing elsewhere in the Gospels when he speaks about the Kingdom of God: he told many parables to say what the kingdom was like – the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the good seed and the weeds, the parable of the hidden treasure and the pearl. So when we hear Jesus tell more than one story on the theme of lost and found we have to expect the truths to be deep and have many aspects. Finally I think that as a master story-teller Jesus uses the first two shorter stories to gain our attention – to set the scene for the longer, more complex story of the prodigal son. It's as if he lets us think we know what's coming – and then he dramatically enlarges the setting and changes the whole dynamic of the story.

I'm going to focus on just some aspects of these stories and the truths I think they point to. The first thing I'd like us to think about is what or who gets lost and how? A hapless sheep, a coin and finally a brother and son. In all cases

they are not just lost in the sense that they can't be found or their location is unknown but – as you can see from the pictures - they are meant to be part of something – and they have become separated from the group or family they belong to. Their loss diminishes everything or everyone else in the story. They have the same value as everyone or everything else in the group. The sheep and coin are not distinguished in any way; the son is the younger – but there is no sense that he was less or more loved than his brother. But without them it's just not the same; things are spoiled. The set of coins is incomplete; a father misses his son every day. The feelings of the shepherd, the woman and the father when the lost are found reflect the profound joy when everything is back together again. So Jesus is challenging us to see other people and ourselves differently – through his – through God's eyes: 'them' – the 'sinners' - the people we feel uncomfortable around – the people that don't seem to fit in – those that it's hard to like and love – in fact, the vast majority of people who aren't like me or my friendship group or my church -- are somehow as important in God's eyes as everyone else. He doesn't make the same distinctions as we do: we are either lost or found. If we are lost he wants us back – if we aren't lost we're less than we could be because someone else is lost. God sees the lost as vital for us all – for our own completeness. We are diminished if they aren't part of the family. We're not being asked to feel

sympathy or pity for the lost – or to feel superior to them because we’re not lost - instead we’re being invited to see that God’s puts the same value on them and that their loss makes us incomplete. God’s vision – his will on earth as it is in heaven is that the lost shall be found.

Let’s move our focus now from the lost to the finders. In the first two stories I’m struck by the devotion and diligence of the shepherd and the woman. The shepherd makes finding the lost sheep his sole focus – he leaves all his other tasks. The woman sweeps her whole house and carefully searches until she finds it. They make it their sole task; they do it with everything they’ve got; they never give up. This, then, Jesus says, is how God searches out the lost – he gives it everything – he gives up everything for this cause – even to the point of giving his son Jesus to this task – even to the point of death.

But what about the lost son? Who does the finding in this story? Here’s a picture that illustrates the point in the story at which the son comes to his senses and recognises how pitiful his situation has become. He remembers his father’s generosity and so – lessons learned the hard way – he begins the long journey home. In one sense it seems that the son is responsible alone for his decision to return home. The father doesn’t search for his son, he doesn’t send out his servants to scour the land. Instead he stays at home, watching and waiting. But there’s more to it than this – because Jesus focuses our attention

on what's going on inside the son – his feelings and the thoughts that motivate his actions. Reduced to feeding pigs he recalls how well his father treated the servants. He recalls his father's generosity, his father's character. He has changed from wanting nothing to do with his father, to wanting a relationship with his father – just to have a place - however lowly - in his father's house. He is now motivated by love for his father and the confidence – the faith - that his father will accept him and not reject him. So in some deeper sense the son is responding to the offer that has never been withdrawn: the father's invitation has in a sense 'found' the son. And so he responds in faith and starts for home. And we see that his faith is justified: even though he rejected his father's authority, he deliberately left the family home, that he has only himself to blame – when he is met by his father there are no recriminations, no lectures, no finger-wagging, no 'I-told-you-so'. Contrary to what we expect, the son is welcomed with open arms and his return triggers not a court of enquiry or punishment but a party! So we have a God who's love is steadfast – it is solid, it can be depended upon, it endures. And God is more interested in celebrating the return of the lost than raking over the past. This, Jesus says, is God's true nature and how he treats each of us.

We rejoice in these stories as they reveal the wonderful love of God to each of us and the invitation he graciously extends to us, through Jesus, to be

embraced by the father, to be found by this divine love. But there is a terrible temptation as we listen to these stories to imagine they are aimed at non-Christians – the lost – or that they were more relevant to us when we ourselves had yet to respond to God. This is not the case – this, I believe, is what I have really learned from my walk, my personal discovery. Recall that I said that the stories were heard by both the sinners and the Pharisees. Well I discovered something.

The clue to my discovery is in this picture. Here we see the father embracing the prodigal son. There to the side, withdrawn, is the older son: resentful, jealous, bitter. You see, measured by their relationship to the father and to the extent that they share their father's heart - there are two lost sons. The older son, even though he has lived in his father's house, and is secure in his inheritance and obedient to his father – he remains distant from his father and he does not love as his father loves. He neither shares his father's embrace nor shares his father's heart.

I reflected that even though I have been a Christian for many years I can find myself cold and distant towards God and his people. I can be resentful of his demands on my time and for obedience; and find myself unsympathetic and uncaring towards other people. This battle occurs daily; it begins as soon as I

awake: to acknowledge God or deny him; to grumble or smile; to help or to hinder; to love or not to love.

You see when we commit to God in Jesus, bundled up in our commitment are impurities and unholy alliances that mar each of us. It's not enough to live in God's household as the older son, enjoying the benefits of sonship. Our lives need transforming – from hearts of selfishness to hearts that beat with God's love – transformed into people who see, feel and act as God would. We are blessed by God in order to bless others.

So my experience of getting lost on an almost hourly basis on my walk drew me back to the figure of the older son and the personal daily challenge to myself: do I accept God's love? Do I love as the Father loves? But I am not alone in this struggle – for my Father God who seeks out the lost searches me out every day; tugging at my heart, presenting me with situations large and small. As if to underline this point I'll share a minor incident that occurred to me on Friday.

I now take the train to Birmingham every morning. This picture is typical – though I'm generally fortunate in obtaining a seat. On Friday I was sat down as we came to Worcester when a man got on and sat next to me. This next picture shows the situation: I'm the fellow on the left in the picture. You can see my resentment. What made matters worse was that as well as taking over

the arm rest he then started playing a game very enthusiastically on his phone. It made it difficult to work on the sermon. So I started to say to myself: this man – who is annoying me – is precious to God, is loved by God. So I managed a smile in his general direction – he gave up a little of the arm rest. I felt God smile on us both. And then as we came into Birmingham New Street something transformative happened: over the PA system the guard announced that someone had accidentally handed him a return ticket to London. He asked people to check their tickets to see if they'd lost their tickets. At this point my neighbour turned to me and said: That guard is fantastic. He cares so much. I lost my phone on this train once and the guard contacted the lost property office, located the phone that had been handed in and returned it to me personally. We were suddenly on speaking terms. His enthusiastic game-playing seemed just part of a bigger personality – the way I'd see a quirk in a friend. I don't pretend there was anything more than this but I was reminded that this person is more than what I see – and that God has allowed me a glimpse of the true humanity in my fellow passenger and the guard. So God is helping me and you to become more like him, to respond to his invitation to be loved and to love. To be found by God and to help him find others.

One final thing: You see as well as there being a prodigal son there is also a prodigal father. As a child I genuinely thought the word prodigal meant

someone who returned or came back. It means no such thing. It means recklessly generous – he loves you and me with a recklessly generous love. A love that seeks us out daily, moment by moment, urging us to be loved and to love. In my dream I saw members of the church family crying, wailing. I was urged to them and all I could say was this: he cradles you in his arms. He cradles you in his arms.

May God's love reach us – and may we share his love with those we meet.

Amen.