

Luke 15.1-10

30<sup>th</sup> March 2025 Lent 4 Mothering Sunday

1 Timothy 15.1-10

## Lost and Found

A few years ago, on a sunny afternoon at the Manse, whilst Rachel was away and I was attempting some gardening, I lost the dog!

We were together in the garden and then, having gone to the shed I came back to find she had vanished. I went up and down the street in a somewhat panicked state and then knocked on our neighbour's door. Being a fellow dog owner he was wonderfully sympathetic and let me look in his garden just in case she'd gone under the fence. It was at that point, when I was wondering how to explain to Rachel that I was as bad at looking after the dog as I had been looking after the children, that we heard her barking. It came from our garden, not my neighbours. So, I returned and located her in the shed, where she had been silently locked up for half an hour, only now complaining. She had followed me in, taken a look round and then quietly stayed there as I left and shut the door. Poor thing! Of course, I was happy and relieved that what was lost, now became found.

Today's gospel, set for the fourth Sunday in Lent, contains two of Jesus' famous parable stories; the return of a lost sheep and the discovery of a lost coin. And in these narratives the clue to why the shepherd and the woman put effort into these searches comes when they find the sheep or the coin. Both call in their neighbours and have a party to celebrate once the sheep and coin is found. It becomes clear just how much these lost items mean to their owners. They represent something precious, something valued and something worth looking for.

Lost and Found – it's our theme this morning.

I guess we all know what it feels like to be lost. As a result of increasingly relying on Sat Nav whilst driving, I sense that I'm becoming deskilled at map reading.

Feeling lost comes our way for a variety of reasons and can be both a physical and spiritual sensation.

Think of that lone sheep out in the Judean wilderness prone to predators such as jackals, hyenas or even leopards. That sheep had lost any sense of belonging. We, too, can experience a crippling sense of isolation at times in our lives. Moments of 'aloneness' that threaten to overwhelm us.

Think of the coin now hidden in a dark corner. What value would anyone give it now? Once, when with the other nine, it had significant purchasing power, but now lodged in a crack in the skirting board its value had diminished. And we, too, can experience moments when we think our skills or contribution is no longer valued or needed in our family or community. Our sense of identity has diminished, our self-worth has crumbled, and we feel lost.

The reality is that life is constantly full of such lost moments.

Sometimes people even talk about 'losing their faith'. Maybe we used to say our prayers every night as a child asking God to protect the people we love. Yet they weren't kept safe – they grew old and infirm, they had accidents or just moved away. Perhaps we hid our confusion about the meaning of prayer for years until later in adult life we just couldn't square the circle anymore and rather than carrying on praying for friends who didn't recover or situations that didn't resolve – we simply lost the desire to pray or the will to believe.

On other occasions we talk about losing ourselves. We bring up a family and then 'loose' our children as they leave home. We work hard at our careers and then 'loose' our position upon retirement. We cultivate friendships and then 'loose' valued members of our circle when they pass away.

We could go on and on with our litany of loss.

In a sense parable stories start from where we are, they begin with life in ordinary and move on to life as it might be lived in the Kingdom of God.

It's into this universal understanding of life that Jesus speaks.

Now, commentators on this passage tell us that action verbs dominate the shepherd – words like: leave, search after, finds, lays on shoulders, rejoices, comes home and calls friends. The same is true for the woman.

The emphasis is on finding, because the parable stories before us today are just as much about being found and reunited as they are about being lost.

Jesus tells these stories in response to some stinging criticism about his lifestyle. The accusation is this: *This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them*'. Those making the charge were the religious people of Jesus' day and those they judged, alongside Jesus, were the tax collectors – people who worked for the Romans, and so called 'sinners' – people who did not completely or regularly obey all the ceremonial laws.

It's so easy to become judgemental in spirit and in that process to completely misunderstand the motivation of others.

The religious people around Jesus thought he was compromised because he seemed to be at ease with tax collectors, he seemed to be able to talk with them – he valued them as people.

In the eating habits of the religious the boundary lines consisted of what sort of food could be eaten and who you could eat it with.

It was all a way of marking you down as either in or out. You either belonged or you were a stranger and you were lost.

Yet this radical Jesus blurs these boundaries and overthrows these religious conventions. It's probably one of the most important aspects of his ministry and he does it here as he quite deliberately chooses once more to eat with people others viewed as beyond the pale and lost. Not only that, in response to their self-righteous accusations, he tells stories about how valuable the lost are to God and how God goes looking for the lost constantly offering them acceptance and respect.

In our first reading from Timothy this morning we hear St Paul reflect on the generous way he felt God had treated him. He writes: *although in the past I had met God with abuse, persecution and outrage...I was dealt with mercifully, the grace of our Lord was lavished upon me...*

Paul developed a theology that had broad horizons as he encouraged the early Church to see God at work in all nationalities and places. I suspect his view of God was moulded by his own faith journey and the way he felt accepted by disciples in Damascus like Ananias. He had gone to that town to wipe out the church there yet arriving amongst them as a changed man he found a welcome that was warm and real. He encountered a deep love, and a loving acceptance.

It is that love, from God and neighbour, that so often brings us out of our 'lostness'.

From today's readings we see that 'lost' need never be a final word – if it was it would surely be one of the saddest words in the English language.

In fact, just maybe we have misnamed these parables – for they ought never to be remembered solely as the stories about a lost coin and a lost sheep – for they are

just as much the narratives of a drachma and a sheep that have been found.

When that one in a hundred sheep is rescued, or that one in ten coins is discovered their owners call in friends and neighbours to rejoice with them.

The sheep and coin are lost and then found – and a party greets their homecoming.

In the Church some of our most joy-filled moments are encapsulated in liturgies of welcome.

The sheep belonged once more to the flock, the coin was re-united with the others in the purse – their rightful, natural and beneficial place in the order of things was re-established.

And Jesus says when we come home to God – there is much rejoicing in heaven.

The Baptist Union Retreat Group used to visit Burford Priory, a Benedictine House, in the Cotswolds most years around January. It was the coldest of places with the warmest of welcomes. A favourite time in the chapel for me was Compline – night prayer – the last office of the day sung in candlelight with the frost on the lawn outside. Regularly at the end of Compline the community would bid farewell to one of their members who was leaving the house for a holiday, to visit family or do a job elsewhere for a few days. It was a touching moment in the service with the brother or sister kneeling surrounded in a circle by the other members of the community who sang and prayed over them – seeking God's blessing and praying for their safe return. Such a loving moment that made me realise a religious community of monks and nuns really is a family.

And when they returned – a similar service – but this time of welcome – was held at Compline also. The community was reunited, and the prayers and songs reflected their joy at being back together again.

Lost – it need never be the saddest of words – but a stage on this pilgrimage of life that eventually leads to us being both found and welcomed home.

May it be so in the name of God who is always looking out for us. Amen.