

Sunday 11th September 2022 – Apprenticed to Jesus #2 ‘The Lost’ (Luke 15:1-10)

I wonder if you've ever lost something valuable: perhaps a bank card or a wedding ring? As a child I remember my dad losing his wedding ring on the beach at Walton-on-the-Naze. A small golden yellow object hidden somewhere in acres of golden yellow sand. I think he learnt a lot about the value of prayer that day! Believe it or not, he did pray and someone found it.

Today's passage tells two simple stories of two things getting lost, and being found again – a sheep and a coin. They seem quite ordinary, don't they, to our ears: of no great value. But in fact, **these two little parables take us right into the heart of God** – of who he is, of what he thinks about us, about who is special to him. That's why for many people this chapter in Luke is one of the very greatest in the whole bible – and in these few minutes we'll remind ourselves why...

Ironically, the key to the text is not the stories themselves, however: it's what comes before it, the first two verses of the passage. It's all about the company Jesus is keeping. Throughout his ministry, Jesus attracts outcasts like a magnet attracts iron – they all flocked to him, because he gave them his attention, he ate with them, he healed them. But the respectable religious people didn't like it, they couldn't understand why Jesus had time for these people. So they mutter about it to themselves –in effect, they are asking Jesus 'why'? Why are you doing this? And Jesus answers them with these stories, which effectively challenge the Pharisees with three fundamental questions of his own...

First, who is the gospel for? Who does God *really* want to hang out with? The scandal of these stories is that the answer is **everyone**. It's easy for most to believe that God loves certain people more than others: and of course we must never forget in these stories that God *does love* the faithful flock: the obedient ones, the 99 sheep in the pen. They still belong to the shepherd, and he loves them and cares for them every day.

But Jesus also has his eye on someone else. In the story, he calls this person the lost sheep. The one who wanders away, gets lost. Now being a sheep is a precarious business, especially then: wild animals, no secure pens. Shepherds would lead their herds all over the countryside to find new places to graze, and would have to fend off the wild animals themselves. So what happens here is quite surprising. The shepherd has 99 obedient sheep, probably as safe as they can reasonably be – but **he chooses to go after the lost one**. Jesus doesn't tell us if he puts anyone else in charge, only that the lost sheep is so important to him that he hurries off to find it. In other words, this lost sheep is pretty special to him.

Now, let's go back to situation in which Jesus tells us this story. 'Jesus, why are you hanging out with outcasts?' Well, the stories tell us, don't they – because these are the lost ones, and they are special to him, just as special as everyone else. It's why he goes after them, with some urgency and whatever the risk.

This is both a challenge and an encouragement, depending on who you identify with in the story. What the Pharisees hated was the idea that people they despised were just as loved by Jesus as the respectable members of society. And that is a message we still need to hear today. Think of a group in society you don't like very much: Jesus reminds today that those people are lost sheep for him, too: he loves them, and would gladly welcome any who would receive him.

The great encouragement, of course, is that reminder that everyone is special to Jesus. **If you feel more like the lost sheep than the respectable one in the pen, then I have great news for you today!** Jesus loves you, he welcomes you, he wants to sit and eat with you. He's risking everything to find you: will you be found by him?

The second question: what is God like? The bible uses lots of images for God, and many of them are majestic and powerful. But these images show us a different side of God – they're ordinary people, aren't they? We see here a close God, an intimate God, a loving, caring God. The shepherd who carries the lamb on his shoulders, the woman looking after her simple home (and the fact that she lit a lamp suggests a home which was too small to have windows – this is not a mansion but a maisonette).

And also a God who celebrates: both stories end with a party. So many people see God as a big, cosmic killjoy, but this story tells us something different. Rejoice with me the shepherd says; rejoice with me the woman says. Yes, there is a cost to following Jesus, as we saw last week – but this same God also invites us to a great, heavenly celebration. Our God is the God of joy and welcome and celebration.

So who is the message for; what is God like; and finally, **the third simple question: how can I know him?** You see, there's a sting in the tail here – the greatest challenge for the Pharisees is that these outcasts seemed to *know* Jesus, to relate to him, whilst they didn't seem to 'get' Jesus at all. For all their learning and spiritual pretensions, Jesus baffled them. What were they missing?

The answer really is that they'd forgotten one of the fundamental truths about God. Throughout the bible it's God who takes the initiative to find us, not the other way round. God comes looking for Adam and Eve in the garden, God finds Abraham and calls him to father a nation, God finds Moses and sets his people free from Egypt, God sends prophets to call the people back to him. God also calls us to obedience, but it's always a response to grace.

I think the Pharisees had forgotten this: they got into the habit of judging a person's standing before God in terms of themselves, of what *they* could do for God. But this is only ever a response to what God does for us first. **The point of the stories is that the shepherd goes looking, the woman goes looking. God comes to find us.** He comes to find us in our lostness, our doubts, our fears and failures. He takes the initiative.

It sounds stupid, but it needs saying: the sheep can't find itself, the coin can't find itself. If that is how you feel about your life, the simple but extraordinary message of this wonderful story is that someone is looking for you: God is looking for you. All we need to do is let ourselves be found: indeed to recognize that wherever we are, we *are* found by God: he's there and he's ready for us.

So if you're sitting there and you feel lost, as these stories were read you found yourself thinking – 'actually, I'm the lost sheep, I hope that God is looking for me...' Well the good news is – he is! That's what God is in the business of doing. Perhaps **today is the time to come home**, to look up and see that God has found you. And if you do, heaven will celebrate. 'I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see.'