

Reflection Sunday 25 June 2023

Gospel: Luke 15, 1-10 The parables of the lost sheep and lost silver coin are full of allegory and deep meaning if you scratch below the surface.

Lost and Found

But let me start with a question. Are you a loser?

I'm sorry, that sounds very rude. I mean, do you lose things? I'm sure she won't mind me saying this, but my wife Jenny loses things.

Last year, we went to America to see our son in New York. We then drove down to West Virginia where we rented a cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Returning to New York 10 days later for our flights home, I asked Jenny for her passport. *Haven't you got my passport*, she said. *No*, I replied, *I've got **my** passport; you've got yours*.

Are you sure, she said. *I don't think I do have my passport. In fact, I know that I haven't got it*.

So began the saga of the lost passport. After several hours searching every bag and item of luggage that we had with us and ransacking our hotel room and our son's apartment, we established that we were in New York and Jenny's passport was still in the Blue Ridge Mountains of West Virginia... in the cabin... in one of the wardrobes, as found by the owner.

Federal Express offered to pick it up and deliver it overnight to New York for us – at a cost of \$1,000. We said thanks but no thanks, and we found an alternative courier, but it meant that I flew back to Heathrow on the scheduled flight and Jenny followed two days later.

Losing things is inconvenient. Jenny is very good at it. I can now add 'passport' to the list of keys, credit cards, combs, coats, shoes, jumpers, handbags, hats and all the other sundry items that regularly, and mysteriously, go missing in our house.

But, in the scheme of life, what Jenny loses are not really important things; they're mostly replaceable commodities and misplacing them temporarily is just a nuisance, not a life-changing event. What we hear Jesus talking about in the gospel this morning is much bigger.

In Biblical times, a shepherd would not usually own his own sheep, but would be employed by someone who did own the flock, and if he lost a sheep – unless he could prove that it had been eaten by a wild animal – he would have to pay

for it and would probably lose his job. It's no wonder that Jesus' shepherd risked leaving 99 sheep in the wilderness and went off in search of the one missing lamb.

As for the poor woman's lost coin: again, in Biblical times, when a Jewish girl got married, she began wearing a headband of ten silver coins to signify that she was now a wife. It was the Jewish version of our modern wedding ring. It's likely that it was one of these coins that the woman had lost, and so it was an absolute calamity for her, not so much because of the value of the coin itself, but because it represented her status as a married woman.

It's no wonder that she, like the shepherd when he found his lost sheep, celebrated with a street party – the shepherd because he kept his job and livelihood, the woman because she remained married in the eyes of society.

That's not the point of Jesus' parables. He's been mixing and dining with tax collectors and sinners and now he's talking to the Pharisees and, by choosing to use the examples that he does, he is deliberately asking the proud Pharisees to identify with the lowest members of society. Shepherds were regarded as unskilled and a bit smelly, they put sheep round their shoulders, after all. They were not seen as important members of the community.

This is a bit confusing for us because, throughout the Bible, shepherds keep popping up with unexpected importance – David was a shepherd before Samuel anointed him King of Judah; it's a bunch of shepherds who are the first people to worship the new-born Saviour of the world. Shepherds first, kings later. And, of course, Jesus refers to himself as 'the good shepherd'.

But at the time of Jesus' preaching, there was only one thing worse than asking a Pharisee to relate to a shepherd and that was to identify with a woman! With their arrogance and pride, these guys probably started each day in prayer, saying: *Thank you Lord for making me a man and not a woman.*

In this subtle way, Christ makes the point that everyone is important to God, including the least important in society. In fact, as Jesus suggests with his allegories about sheep and silver coins, the lost are as important, maybe more important, than the found.

Jesus doesn't so much as teach about the scope of God's love by reaching out to those traditionally outside its orbit, ie tax collectors and sinners, rather he gets the Pharisees – and therefore us, as well – to empathise with the lost... to talk to the lost, to drink with the lost, to eat with the lost.

Some years ago, I had the opportunity to work with the charity Crisis. For two Christmases I volunteered in one of the London Crisis centres for the homeless. For ten days, these hostels provided rough sleepers with food and warmth: the chance to have a shower, a change of clothes and a comfortable bed. But more than anything, the most important thing that they offered, was a chance to talk to someone; a chance to tell their story without being judged, a chance to explain what they had lost in life.

That's where I met Michael. We had a cup of tea together and he tried to teach me how to play chess (unsuccessfully, I might add). He explained that he had once been a doctor, in general practice. But he had started drinking and he lost his licence to practice medicine, his marriage fell apart and eventually he ended up sleeping rough on the street. He was definitely lost. He said that, on the street, he felt invisible, as if people couldn't or didn't want to see him. He enjoyed our cup of tea and chat. It was a rare gentle time for him.

I remember, once, being at a country fair in Yorkshire, watching a sheep dog trial. The best sheep dogs didn't run barking after the sheep, but rather, as the sheep wandered off, the dogs watched intelligently and intuitively, then they ran quickly to get in front of the sheep that were meandering off course and they lay down on the track where the sheep were heading so that they were gently turned back onto the right path. The best dogs weren't aggressive, they were caring and compassionate.

God doesn't sit at a distance from the lost. When we're lost, he doesn't condemn us. When we are a long way from him, he comes to us. He sits and shares food with us. He has a conversation with us. He looks out for us. He searches high and low and sweeps the darkest corners of our lives until he finds us.

God will sometimes do that in the shape of a stranger. Sometimes he will use us – you and me – as that stranger in someone else's life. So, you've been warned, God might ask you to have a meal with a tax collector or a sinner. I recommend that, when God does suggest that, you don't turn him down because everyone has a place, everyone is equal, in the Kingdom of God and you might be offering a passport to someone who is lost.

Amen

With thanks to [Fr Simon Cutmore](#).