Homecoming

A sermon on Luke 15.1–10 by the Revd Dr Jason Goroncy, 11 September 2016

'Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them"' (vv. 1–2). Those who were excluded from society's circles of privilege and respectability; those who were excluded from the temple and its worship; those who felt rejected and without value, and who knew that their lives were in disorder and whose experiences of being in the world were marked by loss in the strangeness of estranged relationships; these are the ones who felt drawn to Jesus.

Then there's the mirror image – that of the pious theologians who resented this one who came announcing the inexhaustible love and hospitality of God; those who judged him to be a threat to their control over the status quo and who therefore directed their efforts to expel him from their midst. In a society that placed much store in holiness through social and ritual means of exclusion, the radical inclusion of one who would later break bread with Judas (Matt 26.20), and pray for the forgiveness of his executioners (Lk 23.34), and bless a neighbouring thief (23.43), was just all too threatening. But Jesus' program remains firm. He saves losers and only losers. He raises the dead and only the dead. And in these two parables, he rubs the salt of lostness onto 'the sensibilities of those who are preoccupied with the sweetness of their own success'[1] and self preservation.

To hear these parables is, therefore, to risk coming away a different person – one not only 'off-balance',[2] as it were, but also one who has been 'marked for life'.[3] For Jesus' parables expose for us something about the way that things really are. They are an invitation to see God, and the world, and ourselves, and each other differently. They are, in other words, an invitation to conversion. Here Jesus tells those who think that they are not lost two stories about things that are lost – a lost sheep and a lost coin. And Luke follows up these two stories with their better-known cousin, the story of the two lost sons and their loving father who refuses to abandon hope for either.

Suppose, Jesus says in v. 4, *'one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he or she not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until they find it?'* Now while it may or may not be true that shepherds in Jesus' day had that kind of devotion to individual members of their flocks, this parable can hardly be interpreted as a lesson in running a successful sheep station. For the most likely result of abandoning ninety-nine unfenced sheep and heading off in pursuit of one lost one is a whole lot more lost sheep. Surely it's better management to just cut your losses, put it down as collateral damage, and just be satisfied that you reached a near-perfect score. But God is a very bad accountant! Indeed, the 'apparent recklessness of the shepherd'[4] is part of Jesus' point, isn't it; that even if all one hundred sheep should get lost, it will not be a problem for this bizarrely Good Shepherd whose business is finding the lost and not trying to make a messianic buck off the unstrayed.

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[1] Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 36.

[2] George Steiner, *Lessons of the Masters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 35.

[3] Stephen C. Barton, 'Parables on God's Love and Forgiveness (Luke 15:1–32)', in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 200.

[4] Ibid., 205.

Throughout his Gospel, Luke tells us that while Jesus seeks to reconnect people to God (5.32), not once does Jesus ever pass any negative comment on them. Instead, he eats with them – an act which in itself is a kind of judgement, a judgement of 'welcome' to those who have been made unwelcome. In fact, Luke reports four episodes in which Jesus receives criticism for eating with 'sinners': In Luke 5 we read of Jesus' encounter with Levi, a meeting which led to this culturally-outcasted man getting up from his tax collecting booth, leaving everything, and following Jesus, and then hosting 'a great banquet for Jesus at his house' where they were joined by 'a large crowd of tax collectors and others' (code words in Luke's Gospel for social scum). In Luke 7, we read that 'one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him', and Jesus went. You see, Jesus doesn't discriminate; he's even willing to be around religious people. And Luke then tells us that not only did Jesus eat with the religious separatist but also that there was a woman there who, as Luke tells it, 'had lived a sinful life in that town', who brought a jar of expensive perfume which she poured onto Jesus' feet while she kissed them and wiped them with her hair. Such was the transformation that love had birthed. And then in Luke 19, we read of Jesus' liberating encounter with the chief tax collector Zacchaeus, a story which ends with these words: 'For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost'. Jesus has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner', they said. Well, of course he has – for this is the God who leaves behind those who you couldn't get out of heaven with a crowbar and goes out in search of the lost – the fragile, the shamed, the religious, the irreligious. This is the nature of one who does not want to be God without us.

This brings us to another thing that this parable is about: namely, joy. Joy is, in C. S. Lewis' words, 'the serious business of Heaven'.[5] And if Lewis is right, and I want to believe that he is, then joy is the purpose of history. It's what creation is for, and so it's what Christian community is meant to be about because the Church is called to be a foretaste of God's coming community. So here Luke gives us a glimpse at how the big story finishes, of how history will end – with the unbridled joy of a loving shepherd who celebrates, together with others, the wonderful truth that the neighborhood is filling up with people who don't deserve to be there.

Which brings us, briefly, to the parable of the lost coin, a parable which appears only in Luke's Gospel and which begins in the same hypothetical way as the one it follows: *'Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one'* (v. 8). And like the shepherd, she recklessly drops everything in search of the one lost coin, an equivalent to a day's wages and something particularly precious in a village economy where cash is a rare thing.[6] And when she finds it, Jesus says, she *'calls her friends and neighbours together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin". In the same way'*, Jesus says, *'there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents'* (vv. 9–10).

Now usually when the Church talks about repentance, it describes it as a change of mind or a change of heart about one's situation. And then there's Dostoevsky's definition of what he calls 'burning repentance' as that which 'breaks the heart … [and] drives sleep away, … [and] torments one into dreaming of the noose or the watery deeps!'[7] But these definitions actually don't get us very far here in Luke because neither the lost coin nor the lost sheep was capable of any repentance.

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[5] C. S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm* (London: Collins, 1977), 94–95.

[6] See Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976), 157.

[7] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment: A Novel in Six Parts with Epilogue*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 1992), 544.

Indeed, 'neither the lost sheep nor the lost coin does a blessed thing except hang around in its lostness'.[8]

The fact is that a lost sheep is, for all practical purposes, a dead sheep; a lost coin is likewise a dead asset. These parables of lostness are far from being exhortations to repentance. They are emphatically *not* stories designed to convince us that if we will wind ourselves up to some acceptable level of moral and/or spiritual improvement, *then* God will forgive us. Rather, they are announcements that it is precisely our lostness that most commends us to God. They are stories that remind us too that many – perhaps most – of those who are lost are entirely unaware of the fact. I thought a lot about that last April when the 11-year-old boy Luke Shambrook was, it seems, 'lost' for five days near Lake Eildon. And I think a lot too about dementia, and of faith's hope that even if we might be lost to ourselves we are never lost to the good shepherd, the Christ who pursues us to the end and beyond, who enters into our memory and who keeps us alive in his, and who keeps our faith alive by his own body, the community of which we are a part.[9]

These two parables suggest that the whole of our life is 'finally and forever *out of our hands* and that if we ever live again, our life will be entirely the gift of some gracious other'.[10] They teach us that God finds us not in the garden of improvement but in the desert of death; that it is precisely from death that we are brought home.[11] And these parables *are* about coming home. They speak to us about the nature of lostness, and perhaps also about the gift of experiencing lostness if we are to really experience homecoming. As one writer put it, 'Weary or bitter or bewildered as we may be, God is faithful, [God] lets us wander so we will know what it means to come home'.[12] So these parables teach us something about the nature of God.

They also give us a hint, as I suggested earlier, about how history might end, offering us every hope to believe that our stories do not terminate at the grave. Even hell is no obstacle, for this is the God who, in Jesus Christ, comes not only into the far country in search of us, but who also descends into the very depths of hell in order to carry us home. This is the God of relentless love – the Hound of Heaven – and it is this God and not death or cancer or drunken driver or any human decision who will decide how history ends. This is what it means to call God the judge of the living and the dead. Like the good shepherd in Ezekiel 34 who searches for the lost and rescues them from all the places where they are scattered, Jesus' work is not done until all come home. And this means, I suggest, that he keeps seeking the lost, even in the grave. He seeks those who have refused his love. He

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[8] Capon, *Parables of Grace*, 38.

[9] There is not one breath here in these parables about rewarding the rewardable, or correcting the correctible, or improving the improvable. There is only the determination of a woman and of a shepherd to *find the strays* and to *raise the dead*. As one commentator put it: 'It wasn't the one with the woolliest coat. It wasn't the one with the sweet, almost human bleat. It wasn't the one that regularly nuzzled up close to his knees. It was simply the one that was lost. No qualification except a disqualification. No structure to its life, no good sense, no obedience. That was the one that got the ride home on the shepherd's shoulders. That was the one that made the angels sing for joy. All right; of course the sheep could say, on the way home, 'I know I'm being saved, because I'm riding on the shepherd's shoulders.' But the gospel message upon which our hope is based is not about the ride home, but about the good shepherd's journey into the wilderness, a journey undertaken out of sheer love and completed with sheer joy. If this is what makes the whole company of heaven sing, then when we join with them at each eucharist we must celebrate it too. Any suggestion that we contribute something to our own rescue is like advising someone going up in a lift to take a ladder as well, just in case'.N. T. Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays: Reflections on Bible Readings, Year C* (London: SPCK, 2000), 104–05.

[10] Capon, *Parables of Grace*, 39.

[11] See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.1*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker, et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 278.

[12] Marilynne Robinson, *Home* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 102.

seeks those who have abandoned his love. He seeks those who have never known of his love. He seeks those for whom life has ended prematurely.

In Christ, there is no such thing as empty time, or 'dead' time, for all time is filled with Christ's lordship over the living and the dead, and filled with the liveliness of the Spirit who is the giver of life. All that has been and all that will be has been gathered up into God. As the great medieval theologian Julian of Norwich risked saying, 'none of what happens in time and none of the toil and suffering that we have to endure in this world will be wasted; it will *all* be turned to God's worship and our endless joy. *All* shall be well'.[13] Not even the grave is an obstacle to the Easter God. Indeed, death is familiar territory to God. And here in Luke 15 we are given a picture of the character of such a God, an insight into the purpose of history, and a glimpse into how history ends – of how your life ends and of how my life ends, and how the lives of those we love and of those who have made life hell for us, will end – with celebration, with a Eucharistic banquet, with the healing of traumatic memories, with the extravagant joy with which God welcomes the found and eats with them, … with homecoming.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[13] Cited in Timothy Radcliffe, *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* (London: Burns & Oates, 2005), 87.