

The 'lost and found' parables – Luke chapter 15 – Rev Paul Day

When my children were young we used to read them bedtime stories – this was before the time they could read for themselves – and often it was a familiar story they chose. One they had heard many times before. We looked at the pages of the dog-eared book together, them taking in the pictures while I read the words. I sometimes used to play a game with them, and slightly change the words as I read them. The stories were so well known, that almost always I got a “that’s wrong!” cry as soon as I deviated from the well-known text.

I sometimes think parables like the ones we are looking at today – the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal or lost son – are a bit like that. We know them through and through. Not necessarily word for word, but we know the story, we know the message Jesus was trying to give, we know how to interpret them. But I wonder if, as in our minds we hear the same tale, whether we are missing some deeper truth. The Bible has a knack of speaking to us afresh whenever we read it. Maybe by assuming we know a story well, we are preventing God from speaking to us today.

So we have these three stories. All of which have a celebration when something or someone who is lost in some way is found – the shepherd finding the sheep, the woman finding the coin and the lost son returning to his loving father. Jesus is being criticised by the religious leaders in that he seems to be celebrating, partying if you like with all the wrong people. But what Jesus is saying is that when people return to God – whoever those people are – that is a cause for a celebration – on earth and in heaven.

So today as we look at these stories I would encourage you to think about times when you have been lost.

I can think of a time I was in France. We had just crossed a causeway onto an island off the Atlantic coast, not far from La Rochelle. We looked at the map to try to find our way to the beach that had been recommended, but soon we were hopelessly lost. The things we saw on the ground did not match up to the map. Everything was wrong. Unsurprising really as it turned out that we were looking at a map of a different island, one a few miles to the south.

And then just before Christmas many years ago when I was at University I was driving home along familiar roads late one evening after finishing work at the

Post Office where I was working for the Christmas post. It was a route I had known since childhood. I knew every road well. But that night there was a thick fog. Visibility was just a matter of a few feet. Everything seemed strange. I was not exactly lost, but in completely the wrong place having missed my turning.

Perhaps your lasting memory of being lost is more serious. Maybe it was when you were a child getting lost in a crowded shopping centre or on a beach (or a parent whose child has gone missing). Maybe it when you were out walking and as the weather closed in on a Lake District fell. Being lost can be a scary and frightening experience. Sometimes getting lost is down to our own foolish actions, sometimes another's carelessness, perhaps more often just one of those things that happens – something to do with a combination of timings and events.

But one of my most vivid memories of being lost had nothing to do with fog or maps or crowds. It was not so much physical as emotional and spiritual.

I had left my job. As a vicar this meant giving up the house I lived in. My marriage had fallen apart. Friends were uncomfortable about 'taking sides' and were keeping their distance. I was on my own in a strange town, trying to find employment, housing and purpose. I was well and truly lost. It was a struggle even going to church.

But it was then that I felt God reaching out to me and assuring me that although I might feel alone, he was with me. I remember an Ash Wednesday service where God clearly spoke a word to me that gave me encouragement and reassurance that things would get better and that he was alongside me.

When I read these three parables today, I can't help thinking about the strange times we are living through. Everything seems out of kilter. We cannot do what we would like to do; we cannot meet the people we want to meet; we cannot embrace those we would like to. The thought of a Christmas celebration without carols, without nativity plays, without family gatherings seems awful. There are parents, children and grandchildren we are desperate to see. We would love our churches to be open again to all who want to come. We want to have the freedom to travel freely and gather as we wish.

We feel all at sea. The fixed points of festivals and seasons no longer seem fixed. The regular activities that mark our days and weeks are no longer taking

place. The absence of these life bearings makes us feel adrift, and maybe for many of us alone. Lost even.

Perhaps it is to us in these situations that God is speaking through these parables today. No matter how lost you feel, no matter how far away from normality and security you find yourself, no matter how alone you are, be assured that God is still looking out for you. It is in God's presence that our true home can be found. And, like the father in the story, he is looking out for us and is ready to embrace us.

Sometimes God takes the initiative and comes to find us – a bit like in the lost sheep and lost coin stories. More often, I think, we have to begin to turn towards him. Like the son in the lost son story, we have to turn our face back to God. It's then that he comes rushing to us, ready to embrace us and support us.

But maybe we don't know how to make the first move when we can't even sense the presence of God. For me all those years ago it was in continuing to worship, in the hope that I would find God where I had known him before. Perhaps for you it might be reading a Psalm – there are plenty in the Bible about people who seem lost reaching out to God. It might be continuing to pray, even though it all seems empty; it might be sharing your pain with another who could pray with you. Sometimes it has to be an act of will – a cry to God saying something like – even though I can't see you I know you are there.

I know in these uncertain and unsettling times, many have found themselves lost and separated from God in some way. It's not God who has left us, but we – through circumstances, through other's actions or maybe our own decisions – who have lost sight of him. And these parables show us that God is always ready to throw his arms around us and rejoice when we turn back to him.