

Parable of the Lost Sheep

Luke 15v1-7 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Getting Lost

I have always had a terrible internal compass. Anyone-else got a poor sense of direction? You go into a new restaurant, and when you come out of the toilets, you turn left instead of right! I have been lost in school corridors, I get disoriented in office blocks, even once I got lost inside a nuclear reactor! But I wasn't really lost, if I kept walking or if I asked enough people I would get back on track.

But have you ever been really lost? Perhaps as a child. How did you feel inside when you knew you were lost? I have been lost twice, once as a child on a crowded beach, and later as a young adult on a trip to Africa. Both were frightening, and in the latter I got badly dehydrated before finding safety.

You can be lost for a long time without realising it, but there comes a moment when that realisation sets in. Your stomach screws up with fear, and whilst you are trying hard to stay calm, there is a panic which wants to rise up and take over. It's a dreadful feeling when you realise it - I am lost. Help!

The sheep has gone astray

Sheep feel safe in a flock. In the time of Jesus the sheep followed behind the shepherd and recognised his voice. They did not use sheepdogs and drive them from behind like we do today.

Jesus told a parable about the Good Shepherd. When Jesus told this story it was already a thousand years old. In Psalm 23, it is recognised that God is the good shepherd. But it is also a prophecy of one that is to come to save the lost sheep of Israel. Jesus places himself in that prophecy, he claims to be the Good Shepherd, and of course at the same time is he claiming to be God.

The Scribes and Pharisees are annoyed with Jesus because he has invited tax collectors and other sinners to eat with him in his home, which in their culture was a way of honouring them. In doing this Jesus is breaking the Jewish purity laws. But Jesus tells them this parable to explain to them that there is a bigger picture, which is that God has sent him, Jesus, to find and save the lost.

The flock represent Gods chosen people, the people of Israel, but there are those that are lost to God. Jesus has come to find them and restore them back to God. They are his sheep, whether they knew it or not, they are Gods lost sheep, which he wants to restore to the flock. They do not belong to any-one else. The Pharisees and the Scribes listen with disbelief as Jesus draws himself into the parable as the Good Shepherd, as God. This is why I have come, he says to them. You are desperate to know why do I meet with Tax Collectors and sinners, even eat with them, despite your precious purity laws. Why? Because God has sent me as the Good Shepherd to find and save the lost. All they have to, is want to be saved, and cry out to me.

In the parable Jesus told, there is a flock of 100 sheep. Picture them high up in the hills all following their shepherd. However there was one, which I will call Elsie, who has seen a rather nice patch of lush grass a bit further away. So she goes her own way and enjoys the indulgence. When she has finished chomping away, she looks around and the rest of the flock are nowhere to be seen. Elsie tries to find her own way back, and just gets more lost. Then running around panicking, she slips into a ditch, which she cannot get out of. Elsie is now lost and stuck. There is no way that she can save herself. She only has one hope, and

that is that the good shepherd comes back and finds her. If he does not, then she will stay lost and die; the ditch will become her grave.

We use some complicated words in Church such as Incarnation, Atonement and Repentance, but these words are easily understood in this simple parable.

Incarnation. God has a heart for those that are lost to him. I imagine that he is as upset as we are when we lose some-one or something precious. So he does something about it. God becomes flesh in the form of Jesus. That **is** the incarnation. He came to be that Good Shepherd, to seek out and save the lost. It is as simple as that.

Atonement. However there is a cost to retrieving the lost. If we lose some-one or something valuable then it costs us, often both financially and emotionally. If I lose a diamond engagement ring it will cost me emotionally but then I will want to replace and that will be expensive. Madeleine McCann, a three year old, went missing from the family holiday apartment in Portugal in 2007, thought to have been abducted. The hunt for her as gone on for years and the cost to the UK Police alone has been 11 million pounds so far. The time and cost to her parents you could argue was more. She is still lost. There is a cost to the lost.

The shepherd counts his flock late in the afternoon as he settles them into a secure area for the night. As he finishes his count, he realises that one is missing. He rechecks and looks carefully at their faces the second time – “ 97, 98, 99 – I have lost Elsie. I should have known, there is one in every flock and in my flocks – its Elsie”. He looks back up the hills to the distant fields that he had come from, knowing that the sun will soon be setting. She could be anywhere in the range of hills by now, top or bottom. There is a mist descending and it will soon be dark when the wild animals will be out. There is no guarantee that even if the good Shepherd stays up all night he will find her. If he does finally find her then then he will have to carry the traumatised sheep all the way back, perhaps 4 or 5 stone of animal, on his shoulders. It will be an exhausting evening after a long day shepherding.

He's still got 99 sheep. Is it really worth the risk and effort? This shepherd owns his sheep. It is not just the financial loss, but the good shepherd loves his sheep, and doesn't want a single one to be lost. Because of that he is prepared to pay the cost of the lost. He will go and look for her.

This **is** the atonement (the 'at-one' ment) paying the cost to return the lost back to the flock. God was prepared to pay a very high cost of saving the lost. First Jesus gives up the glory of Heaven to be born in a hard-working peasant land with high mortality rates, and one under military rule. Then he paid the ultimate cost by dying on a cross. It was that sacrifice, paying that cost, that restores the lost back to God, and gives them their salvation. Without the saving grace of Jesus, the lost will die in their own ditch.

Sacrifice & Repentance

It was not an easy process for the Jews to ensure they had the forgiveness and favour of God, and was very centred on the temple. According to the historian Josephus, that temple altar was huge. It was a square structure of stone, twenty three foot high (4 men high!), and seventy five feet wide and long, (which I worked out would have been big enough to park 120 mini cars on). It was worked like an incredibly large barbecue pit. A large team of priests would act like master butchers. The animals were killed and cut up and their meat placed on the burning alter or put in pots. The whole process was labour intensive, and to sacrifice a single ox required 24 priests. They had very strict ways of hauling and slaughtering the beasts, then in burning, cooking and parching different cuts of meat. Pharisees would often turn up and watch the priests working to make sure everything was done meticulously to their religious laws – they were even known to throw lemons at young priests that got it wrong. These priests worked in the heat and smoke on the edges of this fiery alter and skilfully shifted pieces of flesh around with long handled forks and hooks. Also with ornate shovels they heaped frankincense onto glowing piles of embers. They also poured blood, wine and olive oil on hot parts of the fire, so they whooshed up, combining with the smell of roasting meat and popping fat to create what the Torah called the 'aroma of pleasure' to dilate Yahwehs nostrils.

It was a complex and costly business, making atonement for your sins.

However not everybody could get to the temple. It was accepted that Jews who lived far away or couldn't make the journey, needed a way of being forgiven for their sins without making temple sacrifices.

The way to do this was through repentance. It's not a word we use a lot, but it had a very specific meaning to first century Jews. There were 3 elements to their repentance. First you needed to make good the wrong you have done, whether that was to people, property or reputation. This may take significant time and effort if there were debts to be paid. The second was to publically confess the sin and pray for forgiveness. The final act was to demonstrate that you had a real resolve not to repeat that sin. You were putting things in place to make sure that you did not do it again. It was a public repentance in which others could judge if you had done enough or not. Such an act of repentance was seen as being equivalent to making sacrifices at the temple. Both ways of making up for what you had done wrong.

However with this parable, Jesus is announcing that he is changing the rules. To be put right with God, you no longer need to go through this 3 stage lengthy process of repentance, which depends on the decision and acceptance of others. The new way of repentance depends entirely on the decision and acceptance of Jesus. This was radical stuff. Jesus later on introduce the concept of the communion meal, regularly sharing the bread and wine, whilst remembering his all-accomplishing sacrifice on the cross, as a substitute for sacrificing animals on a temple altar. So Jesus becomes the focus, you call out to him to be saved, and then on a regular basis you ask Jesus for ongoing forgiveness, whilst celebrating communion with him. Animal sacrifices and old-school repentance would be abolished.

Not every-ones choice.

So repentance now becomes a simple matter of choosing whether or not you want to be found by Jesus, and have your heart changed by him. But not everybody wants to be call on the name Jesus. For some, the last thing they want to do is to become a Jesus follower, and be known as a Jesus follower. They think they are much better options.

Imagine your life is a boat, and if you keep control of your boat then you can sail it wherever you want to. The Jesus boat is there, and you call out to it and step in, but you want to keep full control of your own life. I have heard Jesus described as a gentlemen, he is not going to force you into his boat, into a relationship with him, it has to be your choice. You have to go willingly. Whilst his boat is unsinkable, our boat is not, and there comes a day that for whatever reason our boat will start to sink. It is that moment, many people in the desperation of a sinking life will call out to Jesus and be saved. But even then, others will hang out for what they think is a better option.

For those who are facing heavy debts and financial ruin, may put their trust in SS Camelot, with a lottery win just around the next corner. Those with serious health issue are waiting for the good ship 'miracle cure', and those are depressed after a string of destructive relationships are expecting Mr Perfect or Miss Right to be sailing up to save them anyday now. The truth is, that this is not going to happen. Their only hope is to call out the name of Jesus. Whatever short term successes we may have, our only long-term hope rests with Jesus, being in his boat. There is power in the name of Jesus. I regularly see incredible things happening when people use the name of Jesus. It is only the name of Jesus that has the power to set you free from everything that holds you back, that keeps you captive, that makes you lost.

Elsie's choice – the lost is found

The sheep can only be saved by the Good Shepherd. We can only be saved by Jesus. Elsie can stay quiet in the wilderness and keep control of her destiny, but of course she will die. Or when she hears the voice of her shepherd calling, she can bleat back, and be found by him. It's her choice, but crying out to Jesus is the only one which leads to true life now and eternal life later. Each one of us needs to call on the name of Jesus.

Elsie the sheep lies frightened in the dark in her ditch, listening to the howling of wolves not far off. Then she hears a familiar voice calling out in the dark. She know his voice. It is her good shepherd. What does she do? She bleats loudly. In other words she calls out to be saved. If she does not call out, then he will

not find her. She has to want to be found by the good shepherd and taken back to his flock. In theory there are other options, and she could decide that she doesn't actually like being in his flock, and will hold out until another shepherd finds her. But of course that wouldn't happen, and she would stay lost and die. She knows that her shepherd is good and wants the best for her, she is desperate to be found and returned to the flock, so she cries out. However she soon gives up and from her ditch lies there listening. Then the moment comes when she hears her shepherds voice calling, and musters all her strength to bleat back her call.

It is always a this magical moment when the lost hear and recognise the call of the Good Shepherd, and cry back for help. This is the wonderful moment in which an individual not only realises they are lost but recognises the need for Jesus, and calls out to him to be saved.

A true story

Here is an account from over a hundred years ago recorded by a goat herder in South East Turkey of the day he lost a goat...

I called on my cousin across the valley who was a village shepherd and he reported he has seen a goat at the foot of the Quincy mountains, but he was too exhausted to join a search. So my brother and I went in search of her. For four hours we walked in the moonlight over rocks and through thorny bushes. We covered every part of the mountain, climbing then descending again. We imitated the goats noises 'Baaa, Meee'. At last, weary and bleeding from thorns and sharp stones we gave up hope of finding her. Just then we seemed to hear a faint response in answer to our call. The call was repeated. The answer came again clearer and stronger. Exhausted and perspiring, we kept moving on in the midnight stillness towards the direction of the answer to our calls. To our unspeakable delight we found our blue goat curled against a mossy rock, bathing the latest arrival of her family. I took the pretty kid in my arms close to my chest, and my brother held the mother goat and we made our way through the thickets to the path to continue homeward. We found our own souls restored as we brought our wandering goat to a place of safety.

Party

The parable has a happy ending and the sheep is found and returned to the flock.

⁵And when he finds the sheep, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Heaven is dressed up in party clothes ready, waiting to cut the ribbon, to pull the party streamers, to break open the champagne. Waiting for one question to be answered. Will the lost one, choose to be found, and call out to be saved. When just one lost one is found a party begins.

The New testament word for Joy, chara, (khar-ah) is only ever applied to God in one place, and that is in this Luke 15. The one thing described in our New Testament as given God joy, is when a sinner repents, when a purpose lost to God is restored.

Lost Home or Away

As the parables in Luke 15 unfold, the parable of the lost sheep, turns into a trilogy, with the parable of the lost coin, and the lost sons (or the prodigal following on). The sheep is lost far away. The coin is lost in the home, and in the third parable, the prodigal becomes lost to the father far away, but it turns out that his older brothers heart is also hard and lost to the Father. He wants no compassion for his brother, or a party. He is lost at home. Jesus is pointing out that we can walk far from his ways and his church, and be lost out there in the wilderness somewhere. However we can be at the heart of the church, even in the shadow of the cathedral, but our heart can be a long way from experiencing the love of Jesus. This was true for the Pharisees who looked the whole religious deal on the outside, but were malicious and proud

on the inside. We don't have to wander far away like a sheep in the wilderness to be lost. We can be lost anywhere.

Conclusion

Are you in anyway lost today? Many people do not realise that they are lost without Jesus, but when you realise it you do need to do something about it. If we are lost, in any way from Jesus. If we are not part of his flock or family, if we are not following his ways then we are lost. We could be lost far from his Church, perhaps just come on special occasions, or we could be here every week but still have that empty feeling of being lost. It may be a numbness, or a mild panic of loneliness, but we know we are lost. If that is true, then we must call out to him, and want to be found, want to be restored to Him, and follow Jesus. That is our repentance. That is all that is required of us to be saved. If we do that, then his deep deep love will save us.

You may have started off well on your Christian walk, and as a younger Christian felt really close to him and served well, but some-where along the path you got distracted and ended up down a cul-de-sac or losing your way. Jesus wants you back, he has been reaching out to you every since. Call out his name, and let him tack you back safely into that loving relationship, back into the flock.

It may be that you are in the Church and in some ways you are doing really well at Christian, but you know that there is something in your life that's gone wrong, or part of your life that you have always kept control, a part of you that's lost to Jesus. Whatever that is, turn it over to Jesus, let him take control, let him flood you with his love and peace, and restore the part of you that is lost.

It may be that all is well with you. You are already embraced by Jesus, already safe in his family, then you need to share his heart for the lost, his mission to save those that want to be rescued. They are not far away from you. They are your friends, your work colleagues, your family, your neighbours. Most will not know they are lost, most will know that there is a Good Shepherd wanting to save them. He wants us to tell them, and help them be saved. Again he comes to save the lost today, not in physical form, but through his Spirit, using you and me as his hands and feet to help rescue them.

He is the good shepherd. He knows each one of us by name, and he loves us dearly. He wants every one of us, and those we know to call on the lovely name of Jesus, so that we can all sing together..

"I once was lost, but now I am found, I was blind but now I see".

Amen.