

Reflection for Pentecost 14 by Rev'd Peter Shaw

Dear Friends, have you ever been lost?

There are several levels of "lostness". You can be lost and not know it. You can be lost but not admit it. These situations all lead to interesting "discussions" between Sue and myself when we are going somewhere in the car and there is confusion about who is doing the navigating and about how to interpret a map!

Then there's that terrible feeling of "lostness". Perhaps there is a fourth level too - a false feeling of "lostness" when, in fact, we have just lost our bearings for the moment.

In our reading there were two groups present - "Tax collectors and 'sinners'" and "Pharisees and teachers of the law". The first group knew they were doing the wrong thing - they knew they were lost. The second group could define right and wrong and could have stated who was and who wasn't "lost". But it was always "the others" and never them. They would never admit to being "lost" themselves.

The two parables we have just heard about in our Gospel reading – those of the lost sheep and the lost coin - are perhaps two of the best known parables in the New Testament. They are full of joy and delight, expressing God's rejoicing when the lost sinner is found and returns.

They also give yet another example in the Gospels, of Jesus challenging the "status quo" of the Scribes and Pharisees - turning many of the accepted ideals and practices on their head - ushering in a new understanding of what God's love means; that it applies to all of us, no matter who we are or what we have done.

We hear of Jesus gathering all the publicans and sinners together.

Publicans, or tax collectors as they are more commonly known, were disliked - even hated - by the Jews; they acted as agents of the Roman Administration, often enriching themselves on the back of their fellow countrymen. They were considered to be outcasts by the Religious Authorities.

Eating with them was worse; this implied welcome and recognition.

The sinners in this story were the immoral - prostitutes for example - and those who followed occupations that the Religious Authorities regarded as incompatible with the Torah - the Jewish Law.

No wonder the Scribes and Pharisees grumbled!

The Law stated that "One must not associate with an ungodly man"; this was taken so seriously that the rabbis would not associate with such a person, even to teach him the Law; one is prompted to ask: What hope of salvation and redemption was there for sinners in the religion of Jesus' day?

It is interesting to speculate; if these attitudes had been carried through into the present day, would we have Prison Chaplains, both Jewish, Christian and Muslim, or people working with those on the margins of society? – working to bring people back to God. This so clearly illustrates why the "status Quo" had to be challenged before there could be any hope of God's kingdom on earth.

So the Scribes and Pharisees were not at all happy. But Jesus had come to help sinners – he could hardly do that if he did not meet them!

So Jesus tells them these parables, and appeals to their customs.

Should one sheep stray, any shepherd would leave the ninety nine who were safe and look for the missing one. The shepherd wants his sheep, so he looks until he finds it. Finding it is a joyful

experience, and the shepherd would happily bring it home on his shoulders – no grumbling, only rejoicing. In his happiness, he calls on others to share his joy.

Palestinian sheep faced real dangers if separated from their shepherd and flock. Lions, bears, wolves, jackals and hyenas were on the prowl, looking for prey. It wasn't safe to be lost. Flocks were small and the shepherd took personal care for the well-being of his sheep. One lost sheep out of a hundred was cause for concern and action.

The lost coin Jesus refers to was most likely a Drachma – the wage paid to a labourer for a day's work - so it was a significant amount of money. Its loss would have been a serious matter, particularly if the woman was poor. So she searches for it determinedly. She would have experienced similar joy to the shepherd when she found it, and like the shepherd, she shares her joy with her friends.

The coin was accidentally lost - it hadn't chosen to go missing! The loss was quite significant to the woman. Some have suggested that it may have been one of a set of ten worn on her forehead as a sign of her marriage. But not necessarily so. It represented the equivalent of a day's wage, and for the average person, that represented a great deal.

The three stories are all coming from different angles at the universal problem of human "lostness" - the situation in which all of us are sinners and separated from the God who loves us.

Found!

The two parables all speak to us of the searching, redemptive, forgiving love of God. **The central message is that, though all humankind has been lost in one way or another, there is good news that in Christ, we can find our true way again.**

Note well the **love** of God. Whoever we are, wherever we are, whatever we have done, God loves us. Sin and rebellion have their consequences and the Scriptures speak of "the wrath of God". But while God may be angry, he isn't angry - **God is love.**

The one sheep is valued. The one coin is prized. It isn't a good or safe matter to stay lost, but it is a vital part of restoration to know that God loves us.

Note also God's **search** for the lost. The shepherd doesn't have "more important" things to do. The woman isn't satisfied until the lost is found. However they became lost, God is seeking out each sinner.

This searching, redemptive, forgiving love of God came to its focus in the life and ministry of Jesus. It's the very reason Jesus came. It's the key to seeing the significance of all he did and to understanding why he died.

The searching, redemptive, forgiving love of God... Jesus who was born to save his people from their sins is the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep, who calls others who are not yet of his fold, who goes out to seek and to save the lost.

Celebration

The three stories all speak of celebration - of great joy in heaven over every sinner who repents. Being found and brought back isn't some kind of stern discipline - "and you had better stay put this time!" There's a celebration - a celebration of the searching love fulfilled, **an enfolding into the community of love, something which we as practicing Christians need to be continuously aware of in order to project the message of God's true love for ALL of us to people who do not know Him.**

Yes, we all fit into the story somewhere. It doesn't matter how we became lost. We don't have to stay lost. God's love is reaching out to us, wanting to forgive, wanting to bring us back home. The important thing is coming home - being enfolded in the Father's love and giving cause for the great celebration.

Amen