

LOST AND FOUND

Exodus 32. 7 – 14

1 Timothy 1. 12-17

Luke 15. 1 – 10

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I wonder if you have heard the story about the little boy who took a telephone call one day.

The phone rang, and the little boy answered in a whisper, ‘Hello?’

The caller said, ‘Hi, is your mum there?’

‘Yes!’ (*whisper*)

‘Can I talk to her?’

‘No!’ (*whisper*)

‘Why not?’

‘She’s busy.’ (*whisper*)

‘What about your dad, can I talk to him?’

‘No! He’s busy.’ (*whisper*)

‘Well, is there anyone else there?’

‘My little sister.’ (*whisper*)

The caller persisted. “Is there *anyone* else there? Another adult?”

‘Yes! The police.’ (*whisper*)

‘Can I talk to one of them?’

'No! They're busy.' (*whisper*)

'Is *anyone* else there?'

'Yes, the firefighters.' (*whisper*)

'Can I talk to one of them?'

'No! They're busy, too.' (*whisper*)

The caller said, 'Good heavens, your whole family is busy, and the police and the fire brigade are there, and they're all busy! What's everybody doing?'

The little boy giggled and whispered, 'They're looking for *me*.'

The story I've just told illustrates the frantic nature of people who have lost something precious and are in search of it. In our reading from St Luke's gospel, our Lord tells two parables that not only give examples of people who are searching for something precious; he also shows how much rejoicing there is when the lost person or object has been found.

As St Luke frames the parables, there are two audiences: there are the Pharisees and the scribes who are out on the fringes, sneering at our Lord for the bad company he was keeping at table. And then there were the tax collectors and sinners, the members of that alleged 'bad company' with whom Jesus was sitting when he told his 'lost-and-found' parables. Verse 3 of chapter 15 informs us that Christ 'told them this parable', but to whom does the word 'them' refer? Is it the tax collectors and sinners? Or is it the eye-rolling and snippy Pharisees who are criticising our Lord from a distance?

Well, it is probably both; and it is instructive to consider how differently these parables must have sounded in the ears of those two groups.

Let's start with the 'bad company' in front of Jesus. To them, these parables must have been great stories; because the Pharisees and scribes were always saying that folks like these tax collectors and sinners were not God's kind of people. They were lost to God. Indeed, the religious establishment viewed these people as 'lost causes', so much so that it seems never to have occurred to the Pharisees to reach out to such individuals.

So if one fit into the 'lost causes' category, but then heard Christ tell two stories about how God is the champion of the lost, it must have sounded like Good News indeed. Furthermore, to hear that there is even more joy in heaven over one of those 'lost causes' being found than in the static piety of the Pharisees must have brought even greater amazement. Why? Because it suggests that with God, there is no such thing as 'lost causes'; rather, there are just lost and wandering people who are waiting to be found by God's grace.

It goes without saying that our Lord's parables rang very different bells in the ears of the Pharisees and the scribes. In the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, it is obvious that God's joy is directed at Jesus's 'bad company' and not at the Pharisees themselves. They must have been outraged when they heard it.

Both of these parables make it clear that God is overjoyed (and all of heaven along with him) when sinners – or even one sinner – responds to his mercy. And this rejoicing calls for celebration. Interestingly, however, these parables

are not so much a call for sinners to *repent*, but a call for ‘righteous’ people to join in God’s celebration.

Whether or not we will join in the celebration is all-important, because it reveals whether our relationships are based on merit or on mercy. Those who find God’s mercy offensive cannot celebrate with the angels when a sinner repents; and they therefore exclude themselves from God’s grace.

These two parables present a challenge to us today, because they still have the power to expose the roots of bitterness that dig their way into our hearts whenever we feel that God is too good to others and not good enough to us. In abstract terms, of course we want mercy for ourselves and justice for others; but in reality we may find it difficult to celebrate when God has been merciful to others, especially when the ‘others’ include those whom we would not otherwise accept.

A Jewish story tells of the good fortune of a hard-working farmer. The Lord appeared to this farmer and granted him three wishes, but with the condition that whatever the Lord did for the farmer would be given two-fold to his neighbour. Scarcely believing his good fortune, the farmer wished for a hundred cattle. Immediately he received a hundred cattle, and he was overjoyed until he saw that his neighbour had two hundred. So he then wished for a hundred acres of land, and again he was filled with joy until he saw that his neighbour had two hundred acres of land. Rather than celebrating God’s goodness, the farmer could not escape feeling jealous and slighted because his neighbour had received more than he had. Finally, he stated his third wish: that God would strike him blind in one eye. And God wept.

The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin expose the grudging spirit that prevents us from receiving God's mercy. Only those who can celebrate God's grace to others can experience that mercy themselves.

Amen.