

## BEING FOUND BY THE ONE WE HAD LOST

1 Samuel 2. 18-20, 26

Colossians 3. 12-17

Luke 2. 41-52

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

More than anyone else, it is St Luke who has taught us the centrality of the ‘lost-and-found’ theme to the gospel story. God has gone out in search of the lost, St Luke tells us. Think of his masterfully constructed chapter 15, with its two simple parables of a lost sheep and a lost coin, followed by the unforgettable third parable that involves a prodigal son. There were a hundred sheep that a man had, but one, he discovers, has been lost. So he leaves the ninety-nine behind and goes searching for the lost one until he finds it. He comes back, rejoicing. There were ten silver coins that a woman had, but one is lost. She sets aside all her other tasks and searches energetically for the lost one until she finds it; and then there is great rejoicing. A man had two sons. One son claimed his rights as a free individual to sever his ties with his father. He ended up lost, penniless and miserable. As soon as he repented and turned to his father, there his father was, ready to take him once again into his arms, and there was rejoicing, for the one who was lost had now been found.

‘Lost-and-found’ can be said to describe the gospel message in abbreviated form: we are the lost, and God is the finder. Our Lord’s stories communicate that God is like the shepherd, the woman, and the prodigal’s father; and that we are like the errant sheep, the missing coin, or the son who has sought independence rather than the communion of fatherly love.

‘Lost-and-found’ describes a lot of our experience, even from childhood. We know what it means to be lost and found; to be brought back into community; to safety;

to dignity; to wholeness. John Newton, the man who wrote ‘Amazing Grace’, was a dealer in slaves, a merchant of human flesh, when God found him. Jesus turned his heart, opened his eyes, showed him the way back to a new life. As Newton told us himself in the hymn, ‘I once was lost, but now I am found.’

The fact is that ‘lost-and-found’ is the super-narrative of the gospel; it is the big story that contains all the particular stories. We human beings had lost our way, but the Father sent out his Son to search for us, to find us and bring us back. And so we had Christmas, and the shepherds, and the angels: God came to find us lost people and bring us back. Thanks be to God, we were found by Christ.

There is, however, (as you might have guessed) a wrinkle in the story, a flip side to the account I have been giving. And that is the story of losing something of such great value that we can never hope to make it good. It’s not only that we know what it is to be lost; we also know what it is to lose.

And lest we miss it, Luke puts it right there at the beginning of his gospel, a sort of appendix to the Christmas stories. Our Lord was 12 years old, and yes there was a crowd and yes it was a long journey, but still the undeniable fact remains: the parents of Jesus lost him. This, dear friends, is worse than losing a sheep or a coin; it is worse than having your son announce that he doesn’t want to have anything more to do with you; this is the loss of the most precious thing in the world. This is not just experiencing being lost; this is really *losing*. How could such a thing happen?

And yet . . . which of us hasn’t had the experience of losing something precious? I am reminded of one friend of mine who is the mother of five children, and who on more than one occasion would simply lose track of them when they were little. Once, she took her five children into Boot’s, and unintentionally left one of them in the shop, thinking that all of her brood had accompanied her to the car. On another

occasion, after battling mightily to get the five children ready for an outing, she unintentionally left another child behind and locked the door to her house.

So the gospel story isn't simply about 'lost-and-found'. It is more like this: Christ came to find us who were lost, and we lost him. For his coming to find us was not obvious: he came in weakness, with a baby's flesh; with parable stories and not with troops; with a hand but not with a fist. Oh yes, he had power, all right: he showed, for example, that he was able to deflect the stones that were ready to be thrown at the woman who was caught in adultery. He cured many people who were ill. He restored sight to the blind. He even brought the dead back to life. But as the nails in our Lord's hands on the Cross remind us, it is possible for us to reject him. It is possible for us to turn away decisively from the most precious thing in the world. The only one who was pure and smart and strong enough to find us: it was possible for us to lose him, and we did.

Once Jesus is lost, where will he be found? His parents looked for him among the travelling company. They walked for a day in the wrong direction. They searched for him throughout the camp that night. Then they turned around and went back. Retracing their steps, they found him in the Temple. It turns out he wasn't lost at all. He was (and the original version of the phrase is ambiguous) in his Father's house, or doing his Father's business. However we take it, it means he was doing what his real father wanted him to do.

And this means that Christ is never lost. Yes, we can lose him; we can crucify him again with our denials and hatreds and gossips and all the mess that we make of our humanity; but no matter what we do, our Lord won't be lost. He sitteth at the right hand of the Father: even today, he is about his Father's business.

Theologians call this the historical openness of Jesus's life. It means, in one sense, that the gospel is not yet finished. There in the Temple in Jerusalem, and now in the heavenly Temple, which is himself (as John the Divine tells us in Revelation) Christ is doing his Father's will. And the Father's unchanging will is that his Son seek the lost, that he draw all men freely unto himself.

Thus the historical openness of our Lord's life means also that *our own stories* are not yet finished. Even if we have lost Jesus, that 'losing' need not be the last word about us. It was not, thank God, the last word about his parents. They discovered the one whom they thought lost in the Temple. He spoke to them about doing his Father's work, and with those words of self-revelation, *he found them*. When Christ says he is doing his Father's work, he reveals that he has come from God to seek and find the lost, and by that very self-revelation he finds his parents. Our Lord speaks, and the ones who had lost him are found.

Just as Jesus found his own parents, so he can find you and me.

Amen.