

The Lost Sheep, Coin and Sons, 21 Feb 2021, Jeanne Wherrett

Psalm 23 (read responsively); Isaiah 53: 1- 6; Luke 15;

In January 1980, we were leading on an Anglican teenage camp at Beresford House in Trevallyn. The afternoon's activity always consisted of driving to the car park on the western side of Cataract Gorge, walking down and across the suspension bridge, then down to the First Basin with its swimming pool. If you are familiar with the geography of that area of Launceston you'll appreciate that this was quite a trek.

On one day, when it was time to go back to camp, there was no sign of Danny, who had his 4th birthday on that camp, and we assumed that he was with one of the groups that had gone ahead. When we got back to camp, we asked, "Who's got Danny?" No one had Danny!

So we piled into the cars, back to the car park, down and over the suspension bridge and were heading down to the Basin, when one of the campers recognised Danny's shoes. It appears Danny had been playing in an area of bush behind where we had set up our base. When he came out and found no one there, he managed to tell the kind man who found him that he needed to go "that way" and over the bridge.

All that was visible of Danny as the kind stranger piggybacked him towards the bridge, was his shoes. He was too small for his head to show over the man's shoulder. Even now, as I think about what could have happened, I am profoundly thankful to both the kind stranger who found him and was bringing him home, and to the Lord because Danny was safe. The lost little boy was found.

So I can really identify this morning with Jesus' three stories about being lost and found. When I looked at these stories there seemed to be three things that link them together – sinners, repentance and a party in heaven. The first two stories, or parables, seem to be quite straight forward. The third one has several layers of complexity.

Because these stories are very familiar to many of us, sometimes we miss things. Perhaps things that would have been obvious to the original hearers in their culture. Perhaps things the significance of which we miss because we are not steeped in the history and teachings of the Old Testament. Perhaps things that someone hearing the stories today for the first time might notice, but we don't because we are used to seeing what we have always seen, or we see through the eyes of our time and culture only.

So let's look at each story in turn. What clues are there in each one about

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Who or what is a "sinner"?2. What does it mean to "repent"?3. Why was there a party in heaven? |
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We tend to think of a “sinner” as someone who has done something terribly bad. But is that what Jesus means in these stories? Maybe we have missed something. And perhaps there is something more to “repentance” than we might have first thought.

The Lost Sheep

1. Who or what is a “sinner”?

The sheep was lost accidentally; it had wandered away.

Perhaps it was still happily wandering, finding patches of new juicy grass

Or perhaps it was stuck in a briar bush miles from home and safety, desperate, crying out.

2. What does it mean to “repent”?

Perhaps the sheep eventually realised that it was lost, helpless, scared and/or in danger and was bleating in distress; or perhaps it was still wandering happily finding new patches of juicy green grass.

Either way, it allowed itself to be found and carried home.

3. Why was there a party in heaven?

The lost was found.

Jesus concluded [the story this way], “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. (Luke 15:7)



I thought you might enjoy the end in the delightful retelling of this story by Nick Butterworth and Mick Inkpen in which at last the farmer sees his sheep. It has fallen in the river.



The farmer dives into the water. Splosh! He rescues the sheep.



Hooray! The farmer has found his sheep. Let's all have a party!



Jesus says, “God is like the farmer. He loves us just like the farmer loves his sheep.”

The Lost Coin

1. Who or what is a “sinner”?

The coin was lost in a dark corner.

Perhaps like someone who has been wounded or is ashamed.

2. What does it mean to “repent”?

The coin didn't have to do anything, it was just found.

For us, we need to allow God to find us, pick us up and bring us to the light, to heal and restore us.

3. Why was there a party in heaven?

The lost was found.

Jesus concluded, “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God in heaven over one sinner who repents.” (v10)

The next story is often called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son”, but there were two sons, so perhaps we should call it “The Parable of the Lost Sons” or even “The Parable of the Prodigal Father” because an older, respected man in that culture would never lift his robes and run, it would be too undignified.

I wonder what the original hearers of the story of the lost sons thought. It would have been revolutionary for them. In the Old Testament the punishment for a son who would not heed his parents, who was a drunkard and a glutton, was to be stoned to death. (Deut 21:18-21) What was Jesus saying to them? What is he saying to us? What did Jesus mean when he said he had not come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it? Does this help us when we come across things in the Old Testament that just seem brutal and don't seem to line up with what we know now of God as a loving Father?

We know that we need to understand the Old Testament in light of the New. But, still ... Perhaps the clue is in Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus took the punishment for our “sin” on himself so that we don't have to face it, we just have to let him find us, rescue us and bring us home. We just need to repent and trust him.

Isaiah puts it this way:

⁴ Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,

yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;

the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;

and the LORD has laid on him

the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53: 4-6)

So now, back to the story and our questions.

What was the younger son really saying when he asked for his inheritance now?

Usually, one only gets an inheritance when someone dies, so he was effectively saying to his father, "I wish you were dead."

And what was the responsibility of the oldest son in a family if he saw a younger brother falling into "sin"?

In Middle Eastern culture, if there was a rift in relationship in a family, a mediator who was close to both parties would help them work through the issues so that the relationship could be healed. Here this responsibility would naturally have fallen to the older son. He should have got alongside his younger brother and helped him see the error of his ways. He also should have protested loud and long that this was wrong, it dishonoured the father. Everyone in the village would have expected this and would have condemned both sons for their actions. Those listening to Jesus' story, or those reading about it later who were still part of that culture, would have understood this too.

So the younger son in effect had told his father to "drop dead," "butt out," "I deserve it," "I can do it myself."

And did the older son fulfil his responsibility? No. He was loyal and dependable, but self-righteous and self-centred. The older brother's lack of response showed two things.

1. It showed that there was a problem between him and his father because he did not protest that the younger brother's actions were wrong, and he did not refuse his own share of the inheritance.
2. And it showed that there was also a problem between the brothers because he did not stand up to him and try to win him back. This pesky little brother would learn his lesson the hard way.

When the younger son's money ran out, his so-called friends deserted him and he was homeless and hungry, he remembered how good home was. Maybe his father would forgive him and let him just work for him so he would have food and a roof over his head. He would say how sorry he was and beg his father to forgive him.

He had come to the end of his own resources, he was starving and desperate. But still he concocted a scheme that would allow him to work so he himself could put right what he had done. He had sold his father's land, wasted the money and now could not fulfil his obligation to care for his father in his old age. He would go home, keep his independence, work as a hired servant, not have to become part of the family and address his relationships, particularly with his older brother, and keep his self-esteem. He knew he would have to run the gauntlet of the condemnation and abuse of the village when he returned, but what else could he do? He was starving.

But, when he was far off his father saw him, ran to him and kissed him on the cheek, over and over. His father had run the gauntlet of shame and condemnation by the village for him. The son now only said half of the confession that he had planned. “Father I have sinned against heaven and you and I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” The rest was no longer relevant. He realised that he could not work to put things right himself and be accepted. The father had done it all.

The father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.” He wasn’t told to go and have a bath and come back when he smelled better and then they would find something for him to wear. The best robe would have been the one that the father wore on feast days. The ring would have also signified his position, and the sandals showed that he was a free man in the house, not a servant. The servants were told to dress him, in the same way that servants would dress a king. He was now restored to the family, and the father would deal with the relationships and any fallout in a way that the son could never have done himself.

Then the father threw a feast. There was music, dancing and the fatted calf. The calf would have been a big animal so the whole village would have been invited. When they arrived, they would have seen the son wearing his father’s robe and understood that the son had been fully restored and reconciled to his father.

But when the older brother heard the commotion and saw what was happening, he was jealous, angry and demanded justice.

“My son,” the father said [to the older brother], “you are always with me, and all I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” (Luke 15:31,32)

So, there was a party in heaven because the lost was found. The dead was alive again.

But where was the older brother?

The Lost Sons

1. Who or what is a “sinner”?
 - a. The younger son.
Told his father to “drop dead,” “butt out,” “I deserve it,” “I can do it myself.”
 - b. The older son.
Loyal, dependable, but self-righteous and self-centred.
2. What does it mean to “repent”?
 - a. The younger son.
Desperate, hungry, lost, lonely.
Decided to return and ask for forgiveness, but work to restore what he had lost.
Eventually realised he could not **do** anything himself.

b. The older son.

(He was jealous, angry, demanded justice.)

3. Why was there a party in heaven?

a. The younger son.

The lost was found.

The dead was alive again.

Who do we identify with in these stories? Can we see ourselves in there anywhere? Have we been in one place in the past and are now somewhere different?

We can't actually be the shepherd, the lady or the father, because they are pictures of God the Father. But we can identify with the Father Heart of God which is broken by the rift in the relationship with his children and by the broken relationships between the siblings, and we can identify with how he is watching, waiting and longing for them to come home. How he longs to restore them.

But can we see ourselves as one of the other characters in the stories?

Have we drifted away from God? Come back.

Have we lost our first love? Come back.

Are we stuck somewhere we don't want to be? Come back.

Are we in a dark place? Let God find and heal us.

Have we told God to drop dead? Come back.

Even if you have never really thought about any of this before, God is longing for you to come home.

And what if we have we been a Christian for as long as we can remember? Will we fulfil the responsibility of the oldest son, or will we remain comfortable in what we have always known and enjoyed? Will we seek and save the lost? I don't mean that we should all be evangelists, but we all need a heart for the lost, and to fulfil our part in bringing them home, so that together as a community of faith, as the Body of Christ with all its different members here at St George's, we may see many people healed, restored and forgiven. And, as we do this, let's remember that we are all both beautiful and broken.

So, where are we? Wherever we are, let's come home, and pray that God would guide each of us to someone else who is lost and hurting, so that together we may bring as many of the lost with us as possible. There's a party to enjoy and God longs that all people will accept his invitation to that party.

As a response to the Father's love for us, and for all those who are lost, lonely and hurting, let's sing "I am Carried".