

Summer is over and with it, the holidays, but not for all of us! Reminds me of the story about a couple standing in line at the airport waiting to check-in their luggage. The husband says to the wife, "I wish we had brought the piano, too!" "The piano?" the wife exclaims. "We already have 16 pieces of luggage! Why do you want the piano?" The husband replies with a deep sigh, "I know dear, but our airline tickets are on the piano!"

We have completed our study of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah's description of the Good Shepherd, in which their description is made more vivid by comparisons with bad and errant shepherds, and today we are ready to meet the Good Shepherd **in person**, and discover Him.

Our text this morning is known by its popular title, *The Prodigal Son*, which is not wrong, but is misplaced, as the title masks the significance of the entire section, by focussing on a part.

The background setting for this parable starts at the top of chapter 14, *One Sabbath, when He (Jesus) went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, (the top man of an elite group of leaders, or as they say in mafia circles, the "capo di tutti capi") they were watching Him carefully*¹. Two-thirds of the way through chapter 14, in verse 25, Luke tells us, *great crowds accompanied Him...*

People are hungry to hear Jesus' teaching and preaching, and experience His healing. Luke captures the tension in the air when he writes, *"the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to Jesus, and the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling, "This man receives sinners and eats with them".*²

It is natural for those whose conscience had been rattled by Jesus' teaching and preaching, to come to Him, seek forgiveness for the wrong they had done, hoping for a clean slate to start a new, restored life.

On Thursday morning, Mary Newton invited Ted and I to participate in Prayer Spaces³ at North Hinksey Primary School. Children are invited by

¹ Luke 14:1

² Luke 15:1

³ Cathryn Clayton

each year group, to a prayer tent set up on the grounds, to participate in different prayer activities. One of the activities invited pupils to approach a tray of sand, think of something they had done for which they were sorry, write the word "sorry" in the sand, and after they asked for forgiveness for their wrong, shake the tray or wipe the sand with their hands to clear their name, reminding them God does not remember our wrong when we confess it to Him. During the hour we spent, a group of year 5 pupils came in. A few were playful, but it was a joy to see many of these little ones, make sincere confessions!

These tax collectors and sinners who flocked to Jesus, wanted their past wiped clean and to be restored to normal life in the community. This is the background to the parable we are about to unpack.

Story-telling is an art by which the story-teller weaves in various threads which speaks to every listener and reader. Jesus is the best story-teller, by thousands of light-years. What we are about to discover, demonstrates His mastery over this skill of speaking to every person who has read or heard this parable. This one chapter is rich in meaning and we are able to unravel a tiny portion of it this morning.

Luke tells us, *Jesus told **them, this** parable*. Jesus addressed the Pharisees and the scribes, the ones who were muttering that the Jesus was polluting and tarnishing their reputation by eating with those they considered the scum of society. Jesus addressed them with **ONE** parable; a trilogy of sorts, three stories or cameos, but one lesson. The first story about a shepherd who lost one sheep out of 100, the second story about a woman who lost 1 coin out of her precious savings of 10 coins, and finally about a father who lost one of his two sons, and this story has a twist in the tail.

The Hebrew people, like all people, have stories that form part of their national identity, stories which binds them into a shared history, in the same way that World War Two joins us in a shared history and forms our common identity.

The Hebrew people have four BIG stories: Abraham who was promised God's blessing of being the father of a great nation; Moses who delivered the descendants of Jacob from Egypt, through the parted waves of the sea on a dry sea-bed, to the borders of the land shown to Abraham; David, the second king of Israel who consolidated the tribes into one nation; and finally the story of Solomon who built the Temple at Jerusalem.

One of the far-reaching legacies of David the shepherd-king, is Psalm 23, which had become an integral part of Hebrew worship, creating a memorable character-sketch of the Lord God, who is the perfect shepherd.

This trilogy in Luke 15, is deeply rooted in Psalm 23.

The three stories have several themes in common which bind them into one lesson. This morning, we only have time to examine two themes.

1. The theme of being lost:

- a. In the first story, one out of a flock of hundred sheep wanders away from the flock and is lost. The shepherd leaves the flock to find the one lost sheep. Having found it, he brings back the frightened sheep on its shoulders, restores it to fellowship with the rest of the flock, and then, invites family and friends, *to celebrate with me; I have found **my** sheep that was lost⁴.*
This story paints a picture of a person being lost as a result of careless wandering, drawn in by the seduction, *I wonder what's around the corner? Something better, perhaps? A pasture the shepherd has not told us about, or is withholding from us? Let me explore and find out for myself! Let me taste the grass and know for myself.*
- b. The second story is about a woman, probably the wife of a labourer or perhaps a widow (the word is not clear), who has 10 silver coins, the equivalent of 10 days wages of a labourer. To lose or misplace 1 out of 10 coins is a significant loss (10%). If you have shares in Volkswagen, you have likely lost around 35% of its value

⁴ Luke 15:6

in the past week! If shares in Volkswagen is the only stock in your portfolio, your total savings would have decreased by 35%! This poor lady has lost 10% of her total savings and she searches diligently and tirelessly until she finds it, restores it to its safe place with the other nine coins, and like the shepherd, invites family and friends to celebrate finding the lost coin, which **she admits**, she was responsible for losing.

This story paints a picture of people who are lost in the world, not knowing anything better, through no wilful act of their own. What is worse, like the coin, they don't know they are lost. The one entrusted to look after people in their care, discovers the missing person, spares no effort to find the **one** lost person, because **she knows she is responsible** for having lost that person!

Listening to these two stories, the Pharisees and the scribes would, in their minds, blamed the negligent shepherd and the careless woman for not exercising due diligence to look after that which was entrusted in their care. They might have wondered, even whispered among themselves, about the need for such lavish celebrations; if you are poor, why waste your money celebrating the recovery of a small part of what you have. The loss of one sheep out of a hundred would be replaced many times over during the next lambing season, and the woman could diligently save and replace the one lost coin. If indeed, these were their thoughts, it shows the magnitude of their problem. **They** were the "bad" and indifferent shepherds, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah identified, and their power blinded their fault!

- c. The final story puts a human face to "**being lost**". A father has two sons. The younger son wishes his father dead by asking for his inheritance (the only way sons would receive their inheritance is after the death of their father) which he takes, and squanders by reckless living. The elder son, the good boy,

stays at home and serves the family business, never disobeying his father's wishes⁵.

Our tendency is to focus on the younger, wayward, *Prodigal Son*, perhaps because the narrative is titillating, or perhaps in our smugness, we know we have not slid into the abyss of sin this young man had travelled. A closer look, however, reveals a different story. The younger, wayward son returns to repent, *Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; just make me like one of your hired servants, but before he is able to speak his last confession (make me... a hired servant), his father orders the servants to welcome the lad, accept his return and grant him a place of honour befitting the young man's status as the Father's son, and treat him as if he had never left.*

The elder son is green with envy and refuses to join in the celebration, even when his father says, "*(but you **ARE** the elder son), everything I have is yours*"; that was his legal position which should have made him feel secure!

But this son is lost to his father, because this son can neither accept his Father's forgiveness in the face of the shame the younger son brought to the family, nor can he comprehend the magnanimity of his father's love. How can he, the elder son of his father, who one day, like his father, will have to look after the family as was their centuries old tradition, share the house with someone who destroyed them and brought shame? How can he, the elder son accept someone under his roof, who doesn't share his values, someone who has not been a good boy like him. Surely, that counts for something? The bad boy repents and is restored into fellowship, but the seemingly good boy, does not feel the need to repent,

⁵ Luke 15:29

because he thinks he is good, deserving of the Father's best, and not willing to share his Father's abundant wealth!

2. Which brings us to the second theme running through these three stories: being restored into fellowship. But restoration, however, is always preceded by **repentance**. The two go hand-in-hand, but it is repentance which is always followed by restoration, not the other way around.

This is the heart of Christian faith: that God wants us to be restored to the perfect relationship with Him, as it was in the beginning. But **restoration must be preceded by repentance**: to repent of being careless with our lives, allowing ourselves to be drawn into the world and getting lost in it; to repent of losing those God placed in our care, who are now lost and don't know it; to repent of our wilful act of squandering God's gifts to us; and to repent of our arrogance and pride, that others whom we think are undeserving, are getting what belongs to us - to repent of our unwillingness to share that which God has placed in our care.

In this one parable, Jesus introduces Himself as the Good Shepherd who, seeks the lost, finds and restores, those lost through no wilful act of their own, those wounded by remorse because they feel they have not been responsible for this in their care, and restores to health, the broken-hearted. But the Good Shepherd we meet, also rejoices in the homecoming of each one! A party to end all parties, rejoicing like never, ever seen before!

Some of us have strayed and were lost in the past, but the Good Shepherd found us and restored us into a right fellowship with God and with the community in which we live. We can only thank God the Good Shepherd for finding us and restoring us into fellowship with the Father.

It may be that God made some of us responsible for others and for various reason, they are lost to the Kingdom of God. Like us, they need to be "found", and need to be restored into fellowship with God and with the community in which they live. Recognising our failure, repenting our

mistakes, and releasing them in prayer to the Good Shepherd, works wonders in the Kingdom of God! They will be found and restored.

The greatest test we face, is the test of the elder son in the parable. I struggle with this test, which is our attitude of exclusivity. Yes, we are indeed, special to God. After all, *God's goodness and His mercy follows me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in His house forever ! I **AM** special to God!*

We have every reason to feel exclusive, but am I more deserving of God's love and His blessings, more than others? Do I feel, others are taking away what **I think** is rightfully mine? Do I have to share the love and abundance of God, with people who do not share my values?

This is the challenge facing us as a nation, as we address the influx of refugee across our borders. Alongside the reports of the generosity of people, churched or not, we read and hear the grumbling of people who think, they enjoy God's blessings, and no one should take this away from them.

The Good Shepherd is rightly concerned with the lost and equally concerned with restoring all of us to Heaven, how then do we respond to those who want us to share, **our** God's abundance, with them?

They are not like us, they do not share our values, they do not have a shared history with us. We have nothing in common with them, except our shared humanity. They too, like us, are made by the hands of God and breathed into life by the breath of God, who is the creator and gifter of **ALL** life.

Will we begrudge them the love of **OUR** Father, the Good Shepherd?

AMEN.