

Park Road Baptist Church - Sunday 25th October 2020
Zoom service led by Michael Kennelly

PARABLES OF THE LOST Luke 15:1-32

Sally looked troubled. Our new neighbour was standing outside her bungalow opposite our house, clutching a sheaf of leaflets in her hand, and looking round in a concerned manner. We went over to see if there was anything we could do. 'Treacle's lost', she said. Treacle is a tabby cat with a white waistcoat who has a love/hate relationship with our cat, Bilbo. 'We haven't seen him since yesterday afternoon and we're so worried about him. I've just leafletted the houses round about.' 'I am sorry', Pauline said. 'We'll go and search the wood'. We walked through the wood, calling out 'Treacle! Treacle!' much to the interest of other walkers. But no luck. Sadly, we trudged back home. Later that day, a joyful phone call told us Treacle had been found, cowering in the corner of a garden in an adjacent road. 'The leaflets worked!' Sally exclaimed. 'The lady said he was looking lost and lonely. I'm so glad to have found him. Thank you both. If we weren't in a pandemic, I'd asked you in to celebrate.'

Another story, set some years ago. Pauline and I were shopping in Peterborough, visiting four or five stores, sussing out some potential house furnishings. I have to say I quite enjoy shopping. We had nearly finished what we set out to do and were on our way back to the car when Pauline suddenly said, 'Where's my handbag?' Do you know that feeling? To have lost a most valuable and important possession – a woman's handbag? 'Calm down,' I soothed. 'We'll back track and search. Somebody will have found it.' 'That's what bothers me', she groaned. No luck in the first three shops, and then we called back into Armstrong's, in Cowgate. There, still on a chair by the window where we had examined curtain materials, was the missing handbag. 'Oh, thank goodness,' cried Pauline, hugging me. 'What a relief! I'm so glad. Let's go for a cup of tea in Shelton's to celebrate.'

These two examples of loss and rejoicing in the present day lead us to consider the three parables of the lost that we heard read earlier in our worship. They are featured in the last of the series of sermons about questions Jesus asked. In the opinion of the religious leaders of his day, Jesus was not too careful about the company he kept. Here he is, eating with 'tax collectors and sinners' who have especially made an effort to get to know him. Nobody likes tax collectors: in Jesus' day they raised money for the occupying Roman forces and creamed off some for themselves. The sinners were those who were regarded by the self-appointed experts as hopelessly irreligious and out of touch with the demands that God had made on Israel through the religious law. They were the lost, the outcasts, who were suddenly being found through Jesus. 'If you had lost something special' says Jesus to the religious leaders, 'wouldn't you make every effort to find it? And when you do, wouldn't you celebrate with friends?' And he tells those wonderful stories about the lost sheep and the lost coin and the lost son. He is not saying that these 'lost' people were simply to be accepted as they stand. Sinners must repent. The lost sheep and the lost coin are found. The Prodigal Son comes to his senses and returns home. For Jesus, when sinners follow him and his way, that is the

true repentance, not blind adherence to the religious law. God loves it when sinners return to him. The very angels in heaven have a party over this and Jesus' actions on earth mirror God's love in the heavenly realm.

We come now to the third of these 'Parables of the Lost' – the story of the Prodigal Son. Known world-wide, featured in paintings by, for example, Rembrandt, some of its phrases have become almost proverbial – for example, in the King James version, 'fatted calf'. The more I read this section of Luke, the more I see, not just one, but three stories in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The first is **The Story of the Younger Son**. Under normal circumstances when the head of the family died or retired, the estate would have been split into two, with two-thirds going to the elder son, and one-third to the younger. In this case that would not be expected for some time. But here we have this strange request from the younger son: he wants to up and go and have his share of the estate now. An early example of the 'bank of mum and dad' (except there is no mother mentioned in the story). If the father agrees, he would have to sell off land to raise the cash (which would mean less for the other son later on). Such a request, such a practice, which was equivalent to saying "I wish you were dead" would bring shame on the family and one might expect the father to tell his son where to get off. But no – 'he divided the property between them'. The whole story reveals that there are tensions in this - perhaps motherless – family.

For the younger son, life was great to begin with. Plenty of money meant that he had plenty of new friends and a high standard of living. But not for long. A spiral of decline set in. His money disappeared, as did his friends; famine came; and he was reduced to taking whatever job he could get – which happened to be looking after pigs. For a Jew to have anything to do with pigs is bad enough; for him to be feeding them and hungry enough to eat their food, is worse. Then he came to his senses and realised that home is best after all. Jesus believed that a person who was "away from God and against God was not truly themselves." We can only be truly ourselves when we are on our way home to God. So the young man returned and was welcomed and repented and was restored. And, of course, a great celebration takes place.

The second of my three parts I call **The Story of the Elder Brother**. I think that this character stands for the self-righteous Pharisees who would rather have a sinner destroyed than saved. He is a hard worker who has been loyal to his father, despite his own inheritance having been somewhat reduced by his profligate brother. The story brilliantly shows us his reaction to hearing the sound of a party in the house as he returns after his labours. Imagine his shock-horror when he learns the reason for the party. 'Go in and celebrate the return of this immoral spendthrift? Never!' His whole attitude suggests that his years of obedience to his father had been years of grim duty rather than of loving service. He is reminiscent of the Pharisees who believed that blind obedience to the religious law was paramount. He has no sympathy at all for his brother and refers to 'your son' rather than 'my brother' (Is there a

second marriage here?) and accuses his brother of sins that perhaps he might like to have committed himself. He is a self-righteous character who would cheerfully kick a person further into the gutter when that person was already down. However, I do have a sneaking sympathy for the elder brother – no doubt it was hard to welcome the other back after his own life of service, knowing there was less land and cash to support them all. . But note the father’s reassurance to him at the end of the story. ‘You are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate, because this brother of your was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’

Thirdly, we have **The Story of the Loving Father**. The Parable of the Prodigal Son tells us more about a father’s love than a son’s sin. The younger son had rehearsed his story and expected to plead to be taken back as a servant, perhaps under certain conditions and guarantees of good behaviour: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you: I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But when the time came, further pleading was not needed. The father was watching and waiting. He saw his younger son a long way off, rushed to greet him and forgave him with no recriminations. He was given a robe (of honour) and shoes (for sonship) and a feast. The emphasis is upon the forgiveness of God. William Barclay writes that it is told of Abraham Lincoln that when the rebellious Southern states had finally been defeated and had returned to the union, he was asked how he would treat them. He replied: ‘I will treat them as if they had never been away.’ It is the wonder of the love of God that God treats us like that when we turn back to him. The lavish welcome the father gives his errant son is the point of the story. Jesus is explaining to the Pharisees why there is a party, why it’s something to celebrate when people turn from going their own way and begin to go God’s way. The father’s closing line says it all and is worth repeating. ‘This my son was dead and is alive; he was lost and now is found.’ How could this not be a cause for celebration?

Throughout ‘The Parable of the Prodigal Son’ one thing stands out like a beacon – God’s love. Our church logo proclaims us to be ‘a light for our city’ and we have considered on several occasions how we can best fulfil that role. At the Fellowship Meeting this week we prayed for the City of Peterborough and agreed that we need to think on ways of helping the lost. Make no mistake about it, there **are** lost folk in our city who need the love of God yet do not know him. Maybe their only contact with God will be through us. Are we the kind of people who can truly answer in the affirmative those two questions that Jesus put to his critics: ‘Will you search for the lost?’ and ‘Will you rejoice when they are found?’ We know that God loves us, whatever our faults, and seeks our repentance and full restoration to him. Are we attractive enough to those lost people that they will seek us to make the Lord known to them? That is our challenge. Let us be so filled with God’s wonder, love and praise (as Charles Wesley wrote) that we radiate that love to the world around us. Amen