

One day, a little while ago, Julia left the house to go to work, in a worried frame of mind. She'd lost a ring which meant lots to her, had searched high and low, and not found it. So she rang Judy, who helps us in the house, and an hour later Judy called me to say that she'd shone a torch under the bed, and there was the ring. I simply sent Julia an email: Luke 15.9. It was almost as if the incident was set up for this Sunday and our gospel reading about lost things. There was even a lamp (or a torch) and some sweeping. You know what it's like if you've lost something you care about. Your life seems out of balance until it's found. Think about losing your wallet. Or your phone.

Only Luke has the coin story – remember that the coins here were like a dowry, and were jewellery as well as currency. Matthew and Luke each have a story about a shepherd who loses a sheep. The theme – losing a sheep – and the basic form is the same in each: the sheep who are safe are left because it is important to find the lost one. But the emphases are different. Matthew focuses on the pastoral care which should be shown to every member of the community: “it is not the will of my father...that one of these little ones should perish.” Luke is more about mission and evangelism: he contrasts the heavenly joy over a repentant sinner with the absence of joy over those who believe themselves to be righteous and cannot see the need to repent.

Luke is particularly keen to place this parable, and the parables of the lost coin and the lost son (the Prodigal Son) which follow it, in a section which attacks the self-righteous. The New Testament is not that sympathetic to the Pharisees and Scribes: here they grumble because Jesus is mixing with people who do not belong in fellowship with the religious. Even as we try to understand the revulsion which they would have felt, the overturning of centuries of religious belief that God would be glorified by a life lived in purity and discipline, it is still hard to justify their stance when they too know that loving God and loving neighbour is the fulfilling of the law. Jesus asks them whether they can't see that the priority is to find the outcast, welcome them and bring them back, not keep them at a distance in case they drag us down.

The solution to the loss of the sheep was not to make the 99 have such a good time that the lost one felt so second rate that it came back sheepishly. The shepherd went out and looked. What that means for us will have to be worked out. In a previous church it meant working with people sleeping rough, which felt OK until they started coming to the evening service as well. It changed the way it felt to be in the congregation (and the way it smelt), and caused me physical harm occasionally.

A Roman Catholic priest in Sussex has got into trouble not long ago because he wrote an honest piece on his blog about the ministry his church has to the poor and the outcast. They do a soup run every night, and that means that the people they serve feel at home in the church. When they come in they don't always observe the niceties of church life and the priest wrote honestly about it – the poor are messy. A local journalist spun the story to make it sound like the priest hated the poor and wanted them out. Not so, said the priest, but when we seek out the lost, they will make things different for us, even as things are different for them. It would be easier not to attract people to church. We should beware of our self righteousness here.

We will change when we seek people out, and so will they. What is instructive is that Luke shows Jesus's attitude to the outcast as both affirming them as being valued and loved by God, and at the same time challenging them to come to repentance, to live in the new state of life which forgiveness from God will bring. We have to understand Jesus's words about those who "have no need of repentance" as ironic: he has made it as clear as he can that those who do not reach out to the outcast are not doing what God does. They should be more uncomfortable than the outcast. Those who know they need to repent are closer to this love than those who deny any need of it, who think they have already arrived. Imagine what it will be like to be in a community where the condemned and the condemners all realise that repentance and forgiveness are for all, not just for some.

Luke records these parables as Jesus's answer to the accusation that he associated with the wrong sort of people. A church which goes beyond welcoming those who choose to join (because they feel they can fit in) and starts looking for those who don't fit its current shape may well be in for an exciting ride. Matthew is less keen to point the finger at those who think they are righteous already. He simply reinforces the point that if we are not reaching out to the outcast we are well outside the will of God. None should be lost. The pastoral position of the church must be about welcome, inclusion, care and searching out. No sheep will be restored by the flock by the rest of the sheep bleating on about how lost it is. Someone must pull it in.

I continue to reflect on this challenge, which I've spoken about before. Gentle decline in church attendance doesn't really impact regular worshippers. If there were 100 of you and there are now 80, it still feels quite a lot. If there were 50 and are 40 - well, much the same, especially if the decline was in ones or twos. Even ten down to eight is not so bad. And if you as a regular worshipper are still receiving much the same as you always have, there is no sense of urgency about the fact that there aren't quite as many of you as there were. For the 99 the loss of one sheep would be hardly noticeable. For the shepherd it was a disaster.

The parable of the Lost Sheep says that God is about restoring the outcast and finding the lost. We who feel satisfied that we are right might need to check whether it's not us who need to be found. In the parable all one hundred persons need to repent. Listen carefully. If the gospel is true, if the gift of Jesus can change people's lives, if there is wholeness and hope in the Gospel of redemption, if there is new life for people whose current concerns will lead them to destruction, if we have been found and if we are being fed, then it is a scandal that we are not out there right now. It's not about our comfort. It's about God's call. And if God is out there, we should be too.