

The Lost Sheep

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service, on 15th September 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Luke 15:1-10

I'm sorry to say I've lost my penknife - it was on holiday after a picnic - the penknife had been really useful for peeling oranges - and it's something I always have with me on holiday. And somehow in packing up after the picnic, it got left behind. And I miss it. I hadn't really expected there to be such a 'penknife-shaped' hole in my life. I'd had it for nearly 30 years and although it was very cheap at the time, it was a beautifully crafted little knife with a walnut handle and brass fittings and that lovely patina you get with age - and I've lost it. So although it was only a penknife, I can identify with the owner of the lost sheep in the reading, and the owner of the lost coin: they cared about the things they lost and they felt their absence.

And as I think about it, I realise that's one of the things that makes us human. This is an experience we all recognise: human beings are those who know what it is to lose things that matter to us. And often what is lost is much more precious than a penknife. As we grow up for example we lose our innocence, as we discover just how hard the world can be; as we grow older we lose our youth and beauty, and often we lament their passing. I'm sure the veterans who are with us this morning bring with them all kinds of experiences of loss: loss of comrades; loss of friends - that phrase 'missing in action'. Also you've had to deal with the loss, in a sense, of your regiment as it's been amalgamated and reorganized over and over. We know about the loss of favourite places as planners and developers change our surroundings. We know about the loss of favourite people through bereavement and folk moving away. And so for many people here this morning there will be much in your past lives that you miss.

And there may well be things in our wider culture and society that we miss. Many of us in the congregation may look back to the days when the church was a much more central institution in the life of our nation, and it's been hard getting used to being much

more marginal and on the edges of people's experience. More recently and even more seriously, I find myself missing the truth: I miss the time, not so long ago, when if a politician was caught lying, it was a matter for immediate resignation; I miss the time, not so long ago, when there was a real difference between fact and opinion, and we were expected to change our opinions in order to fit the facts; I miss the time, not so long ago, when expert opinion carried authority and when established scientific evidence couldn't just be dismissed as a conspiracy theory; I miss the time, not so long ago, when words bore some sort of relationship to reality, when words had a sacramental quality that gave them weight and integrity.

In short I miss the truth: it no longer seems to have a place in our world - George Orwell warned us long ago that totalitarianism takes hold through slow injections of falsehood, which ordinary people then begin to repeat, so that the lie becomes the truth. So in these days I'm not just missing my penknife, I'm missing something much bigger.

And human beings are those who miss the things and the people that are importance to us. And when Jesus talks about a lost sheep and a lost coin, he seems to be suggesting that God also misses certain things. Coming to terms with loss is something that human beings have in common with God himself. It's part of our shared experience. It's one of the things that draws us closer to God because He knows what it is to suffer loss as well as we do: He's lost a world that He made to know Him and trust Him, but which ignores Him and manages without Him; He's lost individuals like you and me who benefit from His generosity and love, but who pay Him, if we're honest, little attention; He's lost a son, put to death by human beings on a cross outside Jerusalem.

So God knows all about loss: there's plenty in this world that He misses, and He grieves for it. But what these parables of Jesus suggest, these parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, is that having experienced loss, God doesn't just sit back and grieve. He may know about bereavement, but God's experience doesn't end there. Instead, He goes in search of what is lost: He's like the shepherd who risks leaving 99 sheep because the one that is missing becomes the focus of His concern, and He goes out searching and doesn't give up until He's found it; and God is like the woman who having lost the silver coin, won't rest until she's turned the house upside down and found it,

because she cares about losing the coin, and her treasure is incomplete without it. God cares so much about what has been lost, that He sets himself to search and rescue.

The story of Jesus is the story of a God who cares so much about the world He has lost that He comes in search of it no matter what the cost. The story of Jesus is the story of a God of love who cares so much for you and me in our 'lostness' that He comes in search of us, giving His life for us on the cross so that we might find the life we have lost and begin again in innocence, in trust, and in hope.

And Christians are people who come together to worship and to hear God's word in the hope of finding some of those things that we have lost. We come from a world that has lost its confidence in truth - and in worship and the word of God, we find ourselves encountering again a truth that can change us and not just reflect back to us our own prejudices. We come from a world that is full of death and cynicism and despair - and in worship and in the Word of God, we are finding a source of forgiveness and life and hope that can renew us. We come from a world full of anger and accusation and noise - and in worship and the Word of God, we are discovering a peace that passes understanding and that can reconcile us to those who may be very different from us.

I have no idea what sense of loss you may be carrying with you this morning, but whatever it is, it's not beyond the searching love of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. God often meets us in the things that are missing in our lives.

So May He find you, in the midst of all that you have lost, and may you find rejoicing alongside the angels of heaven, as you are carried home on the shoulders of the Lord who makes himself present in the midst of what is missing.

Amen.

Reading Texts

Luke 15:1-10

¹ Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. ⁸ "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."