

## Lost and found

*Psalm 14; Luke 15:1-10*

Has the world lost its reason? Have countries, groups of people, and the individuals within them, lost the plot? I don't mean in a slightly humorous, eye-brow-raising, shoulder-shrugging way. I mean the sometimes blatant, sometimes insidious behavioural meltdowns that occurring all over the globe.

The State of Israel bombing the sovereign state of Qatar in an attempt to kill Hamas leaders involved in a peace talk.

The shooting of far-right American activist Charlie Kirk in Utah at a campus rally. He was a strong supporter of gun rights. The shooting is to be unequivocally deplored. However, when Melissa Hortman, an American Democrat politician was assassinated in June Republican senators made jokes. Democrats unanimously condemned the shooting; some right-wing politicians appear to be actively stoking retaliation. President Trump explicitly blamed the "radical left" for the shooting in an inflammatory message. He said their "rhetoric is directly responsible for the terrorism that we're seeing in our country today."

The debacle around the Labour appointment of Peter Mandelson as Ambassador to Washington, which many have regarded as a serious error of judgement.

Throwing bricks through hotels windows where refugees live.

The financial squeeze on virtually every sector of public life - education, health, the arts, charities and churches.

Irresponsible reporting, particularly in the print media but overwhelmingly online, stoking fear, prejudice and despair almost everywhere you look.

Has the world lost its reason? Has the world, and the people within it, lost the ability to discern between right and wrong, whilst recognising that in all of the cases I have cited above there are significant and serious complexities and responses are not straightforward as context and circumstance often plays a part. Has the world, and the people within it, lost perspective? Where we struggle to balance what is desirable with what is sustainable. Where we struggle to plan ahead for five years which is vital because we have become so obsessed by looking only to just about the end of our noses. Where wonderful aspirations clash with crystal clear reality, and the fallout in human terms becomes immense.

I have never been one to subscribe to rose-tinted spectacle viewpoints of life, but in these last days I have found myself wondering, where is the joy, where is the hope, where is the point of life when there is so much brutality and evil and lack of self-awareness and perspective that should take in a bigger, more honest and more gracious picture.

Then these two little parables from Jesus. The parables of the Lost. The first parable is about a lost sheep. The second is about a lost coin. However, in these stories, the sheep and the coin will not stay lost for long, because these stories are about restoration, and return, and rejoicing in the joy of finding. In that passage Jesus mentions joy and rejoicing five times in just ten verses.

Is this the corrective each one of us needs to hear today in our lost world? Is this the word from God that is going to speak clearly and persistently in our hearts, minds, bodies and souls until this present darkness is illuminated by light? Not simply a recognition of what is lost, truly lost, but what might be found, truly found. In the finding, with the shepherd who found the lost sheep, and the woman who found the lost coin, the calling together of neighbours and friends to celebrate, and the words, repeated by both of them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found..."

The context of Jesus' story is that pharisees and scribes, the religious and legal leaders of that time, were having a go at Jesus because of the perceived rough company He kept. Modernise that company to drug dealers, muggers, human traffickers, unfaithful spouses, computer hackers, tax-dodgers and terrorists and you might get a better idea of what the religious leaders were shocked by when they observed Jesus' table guests. Jesus has no doubt that lifestyles and behaviour patterns can damage the fabric of personal and community life, was immense, wrong, sinful. He widened the perspective. He asked: are these lost souls worth finding by God, worth saving? Without using as many words He drew into the circle of condemnation those who were making judgements on the 'bad crowd'. If you judge, and point fingers, and condemn, how shiny white is your own life, how above suspicion are you? Are your lost souls worth finding by God, and saving?

And what if, Jesus argues, through His association with these ne-er-do-wells, these broken, awkward, unpleasant people, **one** of them turns away from vile, illegal, brutalizing behaviour? Will that not matter? Does that not need to be thrown into consideration? By changing the perspective, by broadening the horizon, Jesus makes the judgemental Pharisees, and maybe us, look again and wonder. Is there to be any joy in helping, saving, redeeming the lost souls? Is the joy in heaven, is the joy in the presence of the angels of God, about the one lost soul repenting and leaving darkness and coming to light, is that even on the radar of how **we** look at things? Are we so caught up in condemning the lost, or regretting the lost that we cannot, with Jesus, join in the active process of searching with the purpose of saving even one broken lost, broken individual. That we, along with all of heaven, might share in the hope and the joy in their longed-for finding? God is like the shepherd who values each sheep in the flock, like the woman who accounts for every silver coin in the purse. God treasures every child of His family. When one goes missing God

goes into search mode. God's nature is love, and love looks like One who goes out tirelessly searching, because the one who is lost is so lost that she or he cannot find their way back home. One other interpretation to these two joyful but challenging little stories. It is not just lost and found people that should be considered. It can be lost and found attitudes and behaviour.

I asked earlier about whether the world had lost its reason, with all the cruel and dangerous things going on that are in danger of being normalised. Maybe we should also narrow down that question to the way we are living our lives, and the attitudes, behaviours, prejudices, disobedience that may be part of how we have lived in the last few days. What are the things in our way of living that we could well do with losing? Looking for the worst in others, and expecting to find it? Not giving someone a second chance? Speaking or acting in a way that was unnecessary, maybe even unacceptable? Is it the case that we need to lose our attitude, our pride, our self-centredness, our wilful turning away from what we don't agree with or like because it suits us better to turn blind eyes to our limitations? Me, you, all of us.

What have we lost by how we behave that break us, and soil us, and shame us, and limit us? Like the lost sheep, in a further wilderness; like the lost coin, in a darker corner, where has behaviour led us to the point that we are lost?

When Jesus comes to find us, after our embarrassment, will we be glad that He has bothered, and that, despite everything we are which is not God, He thinks we're still worthy of the search?

Of course stories can only be pressed so far. People might ask did the shepherd really need that one lost sheep when there were still ninety-nine, who he left in the wilderness in search of the lost one. Some modern commentators suggest that today there are ninety-nine outside the fold, and not just one! Equally, did the woman losing that one silver coin really need to find it when she

had nine (despite the fact each coin was worth a day's wage)? Couldn't she have managed with what she had?

That misses the point. The ninety-nine and the one lost sheep are worth finding and saving. The nine and the one lost coin are worth finding and saving. Because God's love is for us all. He loves those already found, and He is going to love those who still need to be found. Each one of us, found by God, turning to Him, are His cause for joy.

There is no more humbling or common human experience than feeling or being lost. In God's world, there is no more joyful experience than finding and being found. No matter how lost, we and others might become, and by whatever means we, and they, lose their way, the promise is never exhausted: the lamp is burning for us. The shepherd is searching. God is watching and believing that the lost shall be found. The journey home will be completed by every wilful and misplaced soul. Where God says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found..." God is out looking. Can you hear God calling. To you. To everyone?

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**