

## "Lost and Found".

Luke 15:1-10). 09/12/10

### Introduction.

Probably all of us here today have had the experience of being lost. Sometimes this is merely inconvenient or perhaps embarrassing. I was invited to dinner by my closest seminary friend's fiancée's parents. They lived, South of London. I was instructed which platform from Paddington station to catch the train to get to them. I just caught the train as it was leaving the platform and was congratulating myself, but then as it hurtled along, whizzing through many small stations without stopping I began to get a sinking feeling that all was not well! Suddenly we hurtled through West Byfleet station, which was where I was to get off. I turned to one of the business types in my carriage and asked why did the train not stop there? **"Oh"**, he informed **me** ***"you did not want this train, you wanted the stopping train that left 5 mins after this train, from the same platform; this is the non-stop express, first stop Brighton on the South coast. You will be able to pick up a stopping train going in the other direction when you get there. Of course"***, he continued cheerfully ***"you will be about an hour and a half late"***!

Sometimes getting lost is dangerous or even life-threatening. On one occasion when I was living in the Canadian Arctic I travelled with my Inuit friend Andrew to Devon Island to visit his family. After staying with them for a few days we set via dog team for Andrew could hunt caribou. Unfortunately a big storm came up, we saw no caribou, ran out of food and had to shelter in an igloo for 3 days while the storm blew itself out. When three dogs escaped and made their own way home things were looking really grim for us - lost, no food and not enough dogs to pull the sled. Suddenly Andrew's dad showed up with second dog team and food! I never understood how his dad found us after a storm like that. When I asked him he just smiled in an embarrassed way and said ***"he is my son of course I could find him."***

The beginning of Luke 15 opens with Jesus confronting snobbery, self-righteousness and whining. He had become very popular with "ordinary people"- including tax collectors. They flocked to hear him and invited him into their homes for meals. They sensed that here was a man of God who was genuinely interested in them. The religious leaders were not happy with this turn of events. While there might have been some jealousy at Jesus' popularity, they were also genuinely scandalized by Jesus behavior. Pharisees labeled all Jews who did not rigorously keep the whole law ***"People of the Land"***. Pharisees would have nothing to do with the People of the Land. Pharisaic regulations laid down that, ***"when a man is one of the People of the Land, entrust no money to him, take no testimony from him, trust him with no secret, do not appoint him guardian of an orphan, do not make him the custodian of charitable funds, do not accompany him on a journey"***. Therefore they were shocked to the core that Jesus (a Rabbi) mingled with these people, eating in their homes- since they were all just ***'People of the Land'***.

Jesus was aware of this attitude and their comments about himself. He realized how **totally** the Scribes and Pharisees misunderstood the character of God. They **thought** that their attitude towards people who had failed in their religious observances reflected of how God thought of them; but Jesus knew they were terribly wrong. So he told two stories about lost, valuable items, a sheep and a coin. These they are devastating critiques of the religious leaders false understanding of God's character. They were saying "**Only one sheep and one coin are missing, we have got 99% of the sheep and 90% of our silver the rest are do not matter**". God does not think like that says Jesus. **Everyone** who belongs to God is important and God searches for the lost. He is utterly committed, at whatever cost, to finding and being reunited with the lost. These two parables do not simply challenge the religious leaders attitudes; they also emphasize the value, the preciousness, of every single human being to God.

This is a truly challenging truth-it was for the Scribes and Pharisees but also is for us! Sadly church history illustrates how all too often in the institutional church has rejected or ignored people who are deemed unimportant.. If our God is a welcoming God, always searching for those who are lost, how dare we in the behave differently? But this passage is not only a challenge to us in relationship to evangelism and welcoming newcomers. It also raises the question how do we respond to those who are different from ourselves? Why did the ordinary folk, sinners and tax collectors, not show up to worship at the Temple or Synagogue? Because they knew they were not welcome. Why were they attracted to Jesus? Not because he became a tax collector or sinner, but because those folk knew that he was interested in them, he genuinely cared for them and accepted them as people who mattered to God. They were lost but God was searching for them.

Being welcoming involves putting ourselves out, being sensitive to the needs of others together with a willingness to make changes to how we do things so that outsiders will feel comfortable and welcome. At our Alpha program we accept people where they are-with their questions, doubts and criticisms. We are not defensive, nor do we insist that our view is the only one. We create a safe place where outsiders can feel truly welcome and safe. Unconsciously we can set all sorts of conditions for our acceptance of others. **'Yes, we might agree, the church is for all, this church is for all. BUT they can only come on our terms; fit in with our ways; adopt our standards of dress, speech, appearance, music, etc. etc'.**

I don't suppose when Jesus was having a meal with the earthy, sensual people that sinners and tax collectors were, that the conversation was always what your mother would approve of. I'm sure there was lots of ribald humor, colorful language and sexual innuendos. I don't think that Jesus initiated any of it, but neither do I think he insisted **'if these sorts of comments continue then I will have to leave'**.

I wonder if you have ever felt unwelcome when you went to a church?

On reflection can you think of a time when you were not as welcoming to an outsider as you could have been?

Do you have spouse or child who seems to have no interest in God or the church and this is of concern or pain to you?

Do you feel lost at this time in your life?. Lost as far as relationships with others are concerned or lost from God?

If we answer yes to any of these questions then we need this message today. The real image of God us is a shepherd searching for a lost sheep or a woman turning her house upside down looking for lost money.