

Proper 19 12 September 2010

Here is Jesus talking to the religious jobsworths and nitpickers, the people who put duty before compassion. He uses two stories about people losing things, searching for them, and finding them.

Is this a message for me to spend my time in places of ill repute, talking to the lost, rather than propping up a strange institution? Some people interpret it as such, and only as such. But that always makes me uncomfortable for it's based on the assumption that we who go out are *not* lost, and are making judgements that they, the others, are lost. Yes, we must feed the hungry and tend the sick, but maybe there are other messages here that we need to apply to ourselves as individuals. What is Jesus trying to tell those who put rules before people? What is he hinting that they might themselves have lost?

I suggest that he is trying to tell them that in their punctiliousness to keep rules and tick boxes, they have lost themselves, their humanity, their sense of joy and fun – lost amongst rules and regulations; lost amongst their *amour propre*, their pride.

Luke's two short stories come immediately before the story of the man with two sons, the story of the gracious father, the story of the so-called prodigal son. Another story of lost and found, and since I don't have to preach on that next week because it's NOT the gospel set for next week (why not?), I'm merging the three stories. In the father and two sons story, *both* sons are lost: one lost in recklessness and wilfulness, the other lost in playground-style envy and resentment. Both of them have a twisted relationship with their father. Sometimes we are like the son who goes off, deliberately sticking two fingers up at some authority figure: the boss, the taxman, even in

days gone by what we imagine to be the vicar. Sometimes we are like the son who stays at home, begrudging others' successes, others' good fortune, and angry with our friends for having things we lack. In sermons, my guess is that we hear more about the son who went a-wandering and a-squandering, probably because the church was much into trying to control people rather than help them develop. Jewish commentators, on the other hand, concentrate just as much, if not more, on the stay-at-home, sulky son.

If we're honest, it's easy to think of ways in which we behave like one or other of those sons. But I think that it is our calling to move beyond that. We will find eternity and peace (which is a quality of mind, and nothing to do with idleness or sitting having fine thoughts all day) when we become like the *father*: compassionate, forgiving, welcoming, ready to put the robe on someone who comes to us for help.

This robe is interesting, and very significant. The father has carefully kept it. In our bibles the phrase used is *the best robe*. In the Greek it is *stolein tein protein* – the *first* stole, the proto-stole. Imagine the lad before he goes off, dropping his clothes on the floor (an experience of clothes management well known to us all). The father picks up the stole, carefully folds it, and puts it away. Heartbroken, having lost his son, the father still is trusting that things that are lost, people that are lost, can still be found. The first stole is kept for the hoped-for homecoming.

And that – homecoming – is what this is all about. It is about what Christianity is all about. Homecoming, forgiveness, shalom, atonement, reconciliation, HEALING. Coming home to the Divine. We can identify what we have lost, and make our way back home, through what the church calls repentance, re-turning, RETURN. Through repentance we approach the divine by surrendering.

I come to the conclusion that getting lost is a good thing. Keeping young people attached to apron strings, or parents' purses, always ends in tears. We need to be lost in order that we know what it is we need to seek, or re-seek, or return to. And it's not a matter of going back in time to things we used to love, or to things that take us back to our childhoods, but rather a matter of going home to our real selves, to that inner sanctuary of the soul that we shut out through our wilfulness, our recklessness, our pride, our amour propre, our self-importance, our resentments. We can't reach that inner self, that bit of the Divine within, unless we have been lost, and when we return having lost our sense of self, our *amour propre*, the dignity on which we are so keen to stand.

T S Eliot *Little Gidding*

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

In my pastoral ministry to parishioners and others, I find that nearly all our spiritual sickness comes from a sense of guilt or shame about the past. Such guilt and shame often—not always—come from our not having accepted ourselves for the maimed humans we are. Guilt and shame come from our thinking that we are in charge of our natures. We are not. We are, every one of us, potentially able to do the most horrid things to other people. If we haven't ever committed such atrocities, it's just because we haven't been in circumstances that have tested us. This is, in theological language, the sin of our origin, our nature, *Deliver us from evil: do not put us to the test*. And it is this sort of 'sin' that we need forgiveness for.

We come to church and we confess our sins. Do we sometimes just say the words without giving them any thought? Let me tell you how confession began in the early

church. It began by two friends, mates, pals, talking to each other openly and unguardedly opening their hearts and fears to each other. Imagine two monks talking like this as they wandered through the monastery gardens, or cleaned out the monastery stables, or prepared the meals. This is how confession developed, and if you have never experienced it, you have missed out on one of the great healing acts of the church.

This repentance is not a matter of repentance of guilt, but a repentance of *homecoming*. When we confess our sins, we feel a great liberation, a great sense of coming home. RETURNING.

In the parables that we are reflecting on this Sunday, we have the assurance that Jesus is never indifferent to these pleas. The shepherd seeks out the lost sheep, finds him, places him on his shoulders, and brings him home. Look at sheepdogs. They don't run barking after the sheep. But, as the sheep wander off, they watch, then run like hell, and get in front of the sheep. Then they lie down across the path where the sheep were wandering. So when the sheep came up to them, they were gently turned towards the right direction.

That is our challenge for mission to care for the lost, not for our own cosy club, but for the lost. First, think and pray; second, run like hell; and third, be found lying about. And the lost includes our selves. We are no use to anyone else unless we recognize our own need for homecoming. Our own longing for the Divine.

- Jesus said, I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.
- Paul said, This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, That Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost.

John Henry Newman

Lead, kindly Light, amid th'encircling gloom,
 lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home;
 lead Thou me on!
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.

I was not ever thus, nor prayed that Thou
 shouldst lead me on;
I loved to choose and see my path; but now
 lead Thou me on!
I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears,
Pride ruled my will. Remember not past years!

So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still
 will lead me on.
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till
 the night is gone,
And with the morn those angel faces smile,
which I have loved long since, and lost awhile!