

Lost and Found

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Luke 15:1-10

Fifteen years ago, around this time, nineteen terrorists from al-Qaeda hijacked four commercial planes, deliberately crashing two of the planes into the upper floors of the North and South towers of the World Trade Centre in New York. A third plane was crashed into the Pentagon in Virginia. The Twin Towers in New York ultimately collapsed because of the damage sustained from the impacts and the resulting fires. After learning about the other attacks, passengers on the fourth hijacked plane, Flight 93, fought back, and the plane was crashed into an empty field in Pennsylvania, about twenty minutes by air from Washington DC. The attacks killed nearly 3,000 people from 93 nations.

Watching some of the footage on Youtube last week, the planes crashing into the Twin Towers, the horror of people jumping from high windows, and the collapse of the buildings brought back to me the feelings I had fifteen years ago.

A few months after 9/11 I was in New York and visited the Ground Zero sight. A colleague was one of the chaplains there and I was permitted to go into some of the restricted areas where the painstaking work of forensic investigation was being done. It remains one of the most harrowing things that I have ever seen, as each piece of rubble was moved, each piece of personal belonging recorded, each mound of dust was sifted for evidence. Not just evidence of the attack, but evidence of those who had died there, so that grieving families, also gathering in the Ground Zero site, would know their loved ones had been found, and that some trace of them was left. In the finding and losing – it was beyond sombre.

At that time people lost faith and found faith. Some could not understand how a loving God could allow such a thing to happen; others realised that the death toll, horrific as it was, could have been worse. Some had tales of miraculous escape. There was a lot of losing and finding fifteen years ago, and there still is. Losing and finding also remains at the heart of Bible stories,

where significant and insignificant things are lost and found. Losing and finding is part of life, and the Bible reflects this.

Watching those policemen and forensic officers sifting persistently, methodically, almost tenderly through the wreckage of the Twin Towers reminded me of the these two tender parables that Jesus taught about losing and finding. For I was reminded of the persistent, methodical, tender searching of God for those who are lost, and continuing lost until they are found. Whoever they are, wherever they have got to, whatever their 'value' in the eyes of the world, God will continue to search.

Jesus is still dining with the Pharisees, but others are crowding in to hear what Jesus is saying about who is welcome in God's Kingdom. The Bible passage calls them tax collectors and sinners. We might think of skinheads, drunks, the homeless, the mentally distressed, ex-convicts, the people who don't fit in to polite society. People who were lost to society, lost to religion, maybe even lost to themselves. Cases for charity and pity at best; objects of abuse or being ignored at worst. No wonder the Pharisees grumbled. Not too loudly, but their looks and glances said it all. And Jesus saw this. Those who were welcome, those who were not. Those on the inside, those on the outside. Those who were lost, those who were yet to be found.

He tells these two stories. First, of the shepherd, with his ninety-nine sheep who were together, but in the wilderness; and the one who was lost. It made no sense to leave the ninety-nine in the dangerous wild, but the shepherd did not rest until the lost one was found. A lost sheep that is able to bleat out in distress often will not do so out of fear. Instead it will curl up and lie down in the wild brush, hiding from predators. It is so fearful in its own seclusion that it cannot help in its own rescue. Until the shepherd, risking all, finds it, and carries it home. God is like that, says Jesus. To the tax-collectors and sinners; to the Pharisees. God is the persistent, tender seeker. Second, there is the woman with her ten silver coins, but one is lost. She can ill afford to lose it so turns the house upside down until it is found. The ten coins represent ten days' wages and many months of saving. The lost coin is an inanimate object; it is unable to call out or shine brightly to bring attention to itself. Its rescue is totally dependent upon the woman's diligence.

Incidentally, this is the only time when the New Testament presents a woman as metaphor for God. It would have surprised, or shocked, the listeners. God is like that, says Jesus. To the tax-collectors and sinners; to the Pharisees. God is the persistent, tender seeker.

It is clear that the core of each parable is about searching and finding. These are stories of reclaiming and restoration. These are stories about welcome and inclusion. These are stories about value and worth. Ultimately, these are stories about the persistence and tenderness of God. God is out there still, searching and searching and searching. God is not sitting here in Church, waiting for the lost to stumble across our doorstep on the off-chance that they might be welcome and find a place. They **will** be welcome, they will find a place, but first, they have to be found, and invited, and brought in.

In a very small, very simple, but very real way, that's what members of this church will be doing on 24th September – out there on Morningside Road. At the Post Office and outside Waitrose. Maybe we'll get a better class of lost coin at the Post Office and a better class of lost lamb at Waitrose. But it's also what was done last week, when a nervous soul came to the 9.30 service, found it a bit too much, but was helped in and helped out and having found the welcome may well come again, and there have been others like him. That is what happens when we invite people to services, or to coffee mornings, or speaker suppers, or concerts, and people find themselves being found by people like us, who smile, and welcome, and make space and give time.

Maybe you are one of those lost sheep, here this morning for the first time. Nervous, wide-eyed, not sure if you're really welcome. A lost coin, not shining too brightly, but still of value even if you don't know it yourself. But you are welcome, for here the loving, searching, persistent God as found you and delivered to You is message of love and mercy and hope.

And those of us already on the inside, we must guard against being over-protective of this place, or over-proud that we have been here for some time; for once we were outsiders, and not sure if this place was for the likes of us, or if we would fit in, or if anyone would welcome or

Speak to us. Here, God found us too, and delivered that same message of love and mercy and hope.

In this place, though we might not always get it right first time, sometimes we do. And the welcome is here, and the rejoicing is sincere that people who were lost are found; that people who were friendless are welcomed; that people who are fearful are given comfort; that people who are unnoticed are named.

Those policemen and forensic searchers at the Twin Towers searched diligently. Just like others did a few weeks ago in the Italian earthquake. Sometimes a whole, live person is pulled from the rubble. Sometimes it is simply the memory of a person, from a piece of clothing, or a photograph, or some personal belonging. But that which was lost was found, and the ones who had become nameless in the tragedy are named again Ground Zero, in New York City. There is a memorial and underground museum to remember this day in history and the people that lost their lives. There are two reflecting pools located where the Twin Towers once stood. Engraved around the edges of these pools are the names of the victims who were killed. In that way they have been found, they are not forgotten.

And all the while, our loving God is out there, searching and searching and searching. Gathering us in, the lost and the lonely, the proud and the humble, the bold and the fearful, the young and the old, the male and the female, the worker, the unemployed, the gay, the straight, the happy, the sad, the faithful, the doubter. Gathering us in because God has been out there, looking for the lost lambs God loves; looking for the lost coins God values. So that the lost may be found, and all are brought home, and heaven rejoices.

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

Amen