

## **Sermon:** Lost and found

Last year, I visited one of my former congregation members from Cherrybrook. We chatted and talked about all sorts of things and reminisced about the old days before Covid. Then he said to me, “I still laugh when I think of that story you told us about Sherlock Holmes.”

It was a good story. It was funny. And it was memorable.

And I asked him if he remembered why I told it.

He thought for a moment and then said that he didn't – but reiterated it was a really good story.

Often, it's the stories that we remember. We can relate to stories far better than dry talking points – and certainly we remember them far better too.

As we look at Jesus' ministry, the telling of stories was a feature. Sometimes he did give detailed explanations – we can think of his discussion with Nicodemus in John 3, or what he told his disciples on the Mount of Olives about things to come - you know, the bit about wars and rumours of wars and so on.

And then sometimes Jesus made some really short statements. Short, but memorable: Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. I will make you fishers of men. I am the way the truth and the life. And those short statements stay with us – even without trying, we remember them.

Often, though and particularly in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus taught in parables. He told stories.

“The Kingdom of God is like this...” he said.

Jesus' parables are simple stories, but they have an unexpected turn - a twist. They don't, on the face of them, seem to make sense, they don't seem fair. They would likely have been, astonishing to their original hearers – you wouldn't pay your vineyard workers the same for two hours work as you would for a whole day, and if you were serious about growing crops you wouldn't just throw seed all over the place and see what happened and so on. But the parables that Jesus told aren't accounts of historical things, so they're not true in the sense of being factual – but in another sense there are deeply and profoundly true.

They're stories and we know them and we remember them.

The Good Samaritan is a story known far beyond the church. A good Samaritan in popular culture is someone who helps someone else out. In our language, in our culture 'prodigal' doesn't mean excessive or wasteful any more – it means someone who goes away and comes back.

In our gospel reading today, we've heard two of the parables, the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin.

But first, Luke sets the scene for Jesus telling the parables by telling us in verse 1, “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus”. At this point in the gospel, Jesus’ ministry was going well. People were interested. People were coming to listen to what he had to say. Certainly not just those interested in religious matters – and not just those that are unhappy with the status quo either.

Tax collectors were very much part of the status quo: they collected taxes and passed those taxes back through a system which I suspect had more in common with modern network marketing than any tax system in place today, with each person taking his cut before passing the remainder all the way to Rome. Effectively, if you were a tax collector, you had sold out to the Romans.

But the fact that these people, the tax collectors and sinners (“outcasts” in other bible translations) were coming to listen to Jesus wasn’t popular with the religious establishment: Verse 2, “But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

The Pharisees and teachers of the law had come along to listen to Jesus too, but their motives in coming to listen to Jesus were quite different to those of the tax collectors and outcasts. Like modern political adversaries they were there to listen in order to find fault. To put trick questions to Jesus - to trip him up. To discredit him.

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were of course the ones who made the tax collectors and the others outcasts in the first place. The ones who would take pride in identifying sin and sinners. Sometimes we think of those tax collectors and sinners simply as people outside the Pharisee’s reach, the ‘unchurched’ perhaps. But they are the outcasts not outsiders. There weren’t simply outside, but they cast out by the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Cast out. Excluded. Rejected.

The leaders had decided that these groups of people, weren’t worthy of being members of the people of God. The Pharisees and teachers of the law had decided that these other people, weren’t worthy of God.

Jesus didn’t engage the Pharisees and teachers in an argument. He didn’t overtly criticise them. He didn’t tell them to go away. Instead, he told them parables - stories. And we have two of them in today’s reading. Luke is quite clear that he tells it to the Pharisees and teachers of the law; it isn’t just a general lesson, but it’s a lesson particularly for those who are complaining about Jesus choosing to associate with undesirables.

Both these parables teach us that God is interested in the least – in those tax collectors and sinners. In the outcast and the undesirable. Of course, though, we know that in God’s eyes, there are no “least.” Every person is valuable. No matter the colour of their skin. Even if they have tattoos and body piercing, even if they are addicted to drugs and following a life of crime, even if they smell bad and have no money, even if they have poor grammar and no education, or even if they are rich and well educated, they are all valuable to God. We are all valuable to God.

The lost coin of the parable was not more or less valuable than the ones which were not lost. The lost sheep was no more special than the 99 others.

In fact, common sense may well say that you should write off the losses. If you have a hundred sheep and lose one of them, is it a sensible thing to leave the remaining 99 out in the open while you go look for the missing one? You've only lost 1%. For practical purposes, there's not much difference between having 99 sheep and having one hundred.

And even for the woman who lost one of her ten silver coins – we don't know how much time she spent looking and sweeping, nor how much the oil for the lamp to search by would have cost. But perhaps, if we look at it in an economically rational way... well, why bother looking? It's only 10%. Get on with other things.

I guess the sheep that wandered off would be happy to be rescued on the shoulders of its owner. At least as happy as sheep get, but to the other sheep it may have seemed a bit unfair: They hadn't wandered away. They had followed the shepherd and listened to him. But they hadn't got a ride on the shepherd's shoulders. They hadn't been celebrated over. Didn't they deserve special treatment since they had not gone astray?

Sometimes in the church we can be like the 99. People often resent change. Wish things could be the way they used to be. Resent the efforts that are made, and the money that is committed to mission, to outreach, often without any obvious or immediate return.

And while we should be wise and faithful in the use of what God has provided us, we can easily find ourselves envious of what others have – or what others are given 0 and be the complaining 99. We can find ourselves complaining like the Pharisees and the teachers of the law about Jesus associating with outcasts.

The 99 weren't lost. The Pharisees, even though misguided, weren't excluded. If we are the church, truly the church then we are not the ones who are lost. We are found, we are saved, and we are delivered.

And because we are, we should be part of seeking those who are lost. And it doesn't matter if the lost look different from us, or are a different colour and from a different cultural background. It doesn't matter if they don't dress like us. People are welcome in our church, whatever their condition. Who cares what they look like or what they smell like? Certainly not God.

I wonder who the people who wouldn't be welcome in our churches are? Maybe the ostentatiously rich? Maybe people who are obviously and outwardly racist? Maybe people who have been in prison?

To the other sheep it may have seemed unfair that the shepherd left them in order to search for the one which was lost. After all, they had never wandered away. They had

followed the shepherd and listened to him. Didn't they deserve special treatment since they had not gone astray?

We don't need to go far to find the lost. Sometimes it even seems like these days it's the 99 that have wandered off! In the 2021 census, 38.6% of people described themselves as having no religion. That's more than 7,000 people.

But 43.3% identify themselves as Christian, and that's nearly 8,000 people. But how many of those do you think have set foot in a church in, say, the last year?

2.7% of Australians identify as Uniting Church... so it follows that there should be about 496 Uniting Church people in St Ives. I wonder where all the others go to church?

The lost aren't far away. The lost today aren't even necessarily unfamiliar with Jesus!

In John's gospel, we read that when Jesus was in Samaria, the people came out to see him. Of course, at the time, the Jews thought that Samaritans were people who were hopelessly alienated from God. But Jesus turned to his disciples and said, "You have a saying 'Four more months and then the harvest'. But I tell you, take a good look at the fields; the crops are now ripe and ready to be harvested" (John 4:35). The harvest Jesus was talking about was the Samaritans. Jesus' teaching so often has a twist or surprise in it – and this was one of those surprises: Imagine a farmer walking by his field and not recognising that it was ready to be harvested.

Imagine us, the church, not recognising the lost? We don't look at people and say "that person is not ready to come to know God — and probably never will be", do we?

Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:37-38).

In Jesus' stories we've heard today, the finding of the lost, the lost sheep and the lost coin, is met with joy. There is celebration. Verse 6 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep. verse 9 "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.", and Jesus makes his point absolutely clear in verse 10, when he says, "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

In the parable which follows these two, the father of the lost – who we popularly call the 'prodigal son' runs to the son who was lost and throws his arms around him. He puts a new robe on him and a ring on his finger. He throws a feast for him and invites all his friends and neighbours. He rejoices over his son who was lost, but is now found. But the older brother who never left home was angry that the father showed this special attention to the sinful son. Yet, that was the way it should have been.

I think we in the modern church don't do so well at rejoicing. I wonder how much rejoicing we do? How much joy we share?

Worship is a serious business. It's sombre. We like to do it right.

But joy is part of the fruit of the spirit. We do much better on the others, though: love, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Gal 5:22-23)

We should be joyful though. We should rejoice in the good news. And of course, we shouldn't be resentful of those that are celebrated over.

There's a story of a couple who were shopping at a major shopping centre with their two daughters. In the crowd, one of them got separated from her sister and her parents. The parents panicked and search desperately for the girl. One minute she was walking by their side in the crowd and the next minute she was gone. They called out to her and looked for her everywhere.

And then they saw her. She'd been distracted by a shop window and simply stopped walking and looked at the display. The parents grabbed her, hugged her, kissed her and told her that they missed her. They didn't kiss and hug their other daughter who was with them the whole time. The parent's attention was focused on the girl who'd been lost. That is as it should have been: It didn't mean that the parents loved one daughter more than the other. They loved them both, of course, but one was lost and now was found. And they celebrated; they were joyous.

And so it is with us and God. Each one of us who has come to know Jesus, as we will soon sing, was once lost but is now found.

Each one of us, and in fact every person, is important to God. Not because God needs us, or wants to use us for his purposes. But because God loves us. He loves us so much that he gave up his son for us.

When we were still far off, he reached out to us, to bring us home. When we have gone astray, Jesus carries us home on his shoulders – those some shoulders that bore our burdens on the cross. And when the lost return to God there is great rejoicing – and we should be part of that rejoicing.

Amen