

**Texts: Luke 15:1-32**

**Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> April 2018**

**Brightons Parish Church**

**Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.**

**In my own devotional time, where I read the Bible, journal and pray, I usually prefer to work through a chapter of the Bible each day, working steadily through a book of the Bible over a period of time. But this year, I've been taking a chapter of a devotional book written by a British pastor and reflecting on the theme of that chapter over a few days, maybe even the whole week in some cases. I've found it to be a helpful change of pace because it has allowed me to dwell within a theme or passage for a longer period of time, rather than rushing through the Scriptures, and with that different insights have come from the very same theme or passage.**

**Over the weeks up to the summer break, we're going to adopt a similar approach with Luke chapter 15 and especially with the verses relating to the parable of the lost son. My hope is that by taking the time to dwell in this small portion of Scripture, we might then see the richness of these parables and appreciate as much of their relevance for our lives as possible.**

**To get us started, I wonder if you might turn to your neighbour **and for one minute**, share with them what the last thing you lost was? You've got 1 minute – so go!**

**We loose stuff all the time** – keys, wallets, glasses, hopefully not the kids or grandkids too often But I also have friends who within themselves feel lost at times – they are confused, maybe unsure about the future, struggling to join the dots or chart a way forward, maybe stuck in a never-ending cycle of difficulty. It is not only stuff that we lose, we can lose a whole lot more than that.

**In the time of Jesus, the people of God**, the Israelites, had lost things too – they had lost their independence and were now governed by Rome; they had lost the glory days when the royal line of David sat upon the throne such that the nation prospered. Much had been lost and the people longed for God to fulfil His promises to send the Messiah, the promised King,...

**the One who would rebuild the nation, restoring hope and justice and peace, and ushering in the very kingdom of God upon the earth.**

**So, when Jesus comes on the scene** and rumours start to fly that He might be the Messiah, well, it raised all sorts of questions, including for the religious leaders. Because the religious leaders had their ideas of what the Messiah might be like and what He would achieve; they had a vision of how God's kingdom would take shape and, in particular, who would qualify for membership in the kingdom of God.

**For the Pharisees,** moral and religious purity was paramount. They believed that God would only restore

**what Israel had lost if, and when, the nation turned to God and followed God's law more completely.**

**But for all the religious leaders, Jesus posed a quandary: on the one hand, Jesus was doing and saying some incredible things, things that no one could do if God wasn't with Him. But on the other hand, He was saying and doing some things that went completely against each and every school of religious thought within Judaism.**

**For the Pharisees, one particular issue is that: 'This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.' (v2). The 'them' here is the 'tax collectors and sinners' who were gathering around to hear Jesus (v1). For the Pharisees, this is a complete breach of God's law, there is no way God would sanction such behaviour,...**

and God is certainly not going to restore what has been lost to Israel as a result. Indeed, **there was a Rabbinic saying** which read: ‘Let not a man associate with the wicked, not even to bring him to the Law.’

The wicked were cut off – they were of no value – even if they might have been persuaded to follow the Law and become part of God’s people. No, those tax collectors were written off – they were lackeys and disloyal – and those sinners, well they’re so immoral and unclean that they are of no value either, neither will have no place in the kingdom of God, neither will not feature in what God will bring through the Messiah. **And so, they mutter against Jesus**, ‘This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them’ (v2) –

**because how could any possible Messiah eat with such people, and in doing so, show them acceptance and solidarity?**

**I wonder, do you ever feel 'lost' in these ways? Do you feel cut-off, or that you don't fit? Maybe you feel of lesser value, or that you don't make the grade? Maybe you are caught in a lifestyle that is unhelpful, which no one else even notices, and it isn't the head-line grabbing, but it still makes life hard, and leaves you feeling lost?**

**Or maybe you look at your life, or the life of those you care about, and it's not what you want it to be, and you wonder: have I done wrong, has God abandoned me, is God punishing me? Is that the kind of lostness you face?**

**There comes a time in all our lives, maybe more often than we'd prefer, when it is more than our keys which are lost, and in those moments, I wonder what, if any, hope you would take from your faith?**

**In our passage today, Jesus speaks into the lostness of His audience. To those first hearers, both the religious elite and the religiously bankrupt, Jesus shares Good News, for the three parables are His answer to the questioning and objections He faces.**

**In the first two parables a singular portrayal of God is conveyed. Jesus begins with a story of a shepherd and his lost sheep. The shepherd has 100 sheep, but one has wandered away and become lost. And so, the shepherd goes looking for that one, individual sheep,...**

**leaving the 99 behind. It may seem foolish to our ears for the shepherd to leave the 99 so as to search for the one. But likely, the shepherd knew that the 99 would be safe in the sheepfold, probably being cared for by other shepherds, whereas the lost sheep was in danger. Because each sheep was of high value, any shepherd knew that it was worthwhile to search diligently for the lost one.**

**Jesus simply appeals to common custom on how a shepherd would care for his sheep, that it was worth the shepherd's time and effort to search far and wide for that one lost sheep.**

**Then in the second parable, a woman has 10 coins, and she loses one,...**

**prompting a thorough search of her small property. These coins may have been the woman's life savings, or they might have been coins she received as a wedding gift, as was the custom of the time. Either way, the loss of a coin would be a serious matter for this poor woman, and so she hunts high and low for that one lost coin.**

**What is striking about both these parables, is how they overturn Rabbinic teaching of the time.**

**Jewish scholar, C.G. Montefiore, saw in the parable of the shepherd a new idea about God, for the rabbis agreed that God would welcome the penitent sinner, but the idea that God takes the initiative, that God seeks out the lost and brings them home, that God is a seeking God, well that is distinctive to the teaching of Jesus.**

Similarly, among the rabbinic writings there is the lost coin motif, **but it is used very differently**. ‘If a man keeps seeking for a lost coin [how] much more should he seek for the Law’, said the rabbis. But there is no rabbinic equivalent to God’s seeking of lost coins, and certainly not of lost individuals.

The characteristic feature of these two parables is that the Lord goes out to seek what is lost even before that individual turns to God. What Jesus reveals to the religious elite and to the religiously bankrupt is that God loves with **an extraordinary love**: God never says, “It is but one; let it go; enough remain.” God will never nonchalantly say, “You win some; you lose some.” No, no, no, says Jesus....

**The Father's heart is one of seeking love, for if a shepherd will go to this much effort to recover a sheep and if a woman will go to this much effort to recover a coin, how much more effort will God exert to recover a lost person!**

**In the teaching of Jesus, in His revelation of the Father's heart, "it is now the case that repentance comes by means of grace" – for Jesus, grace is the first thing, the unmerited favour and affection of God comes first, and then repentance comes as a response to grace.**

**Friends, do you see what Jesus is teaching us? Do you see what He reveals of Father God's heart for you and I? Do you appreciate that God loves with a love that seeks us out?**

**In all the ways we can get ourselves lost, from destructive life choices, to inner confusion, to an eternal future without God – across the whole gambit of what it means to be lost, God seeks you out, He seeks to set you free and bring you into life in all its fullness. And He does it all, because He loves with an extraordinary love.**

**And yet, Jesus goes one step further, for in His telling of a third parable, He really flips everyone's ideas of God upside down. **The story is familiar to many** of us: there was a father who had two sons. The younger asked for his share of the inheritance, received it, and promptly left for a far country, where he squandered it all on sensual and frivolous pleasure. He returned home penitently and, to his surprise, was received with open arms by his father.**

**It is familiar, but without knowing the customs of the time, it is easy to miss the significance of the parable. When the younger son comes to the father and says, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate’ (v12) the original listeners would have been astounded – not that there was anything amiss in the son’s expectation of a share in the family wealth, that usually would happen upon death. But to ASK for it now, well that is the equivalent of wishing his father to be dead.**

**But the father does it, he divides the property, and the Greek word for property here is the equivalent of “life” – for the love of his child, the father will tear his life apart for the younger son. Here is a love that is startling. But Jesus goes further still.**

**Upon the son's return**, the father runs to meet him, he kisses the son, he wraps his precious child in his arms, then calls for a robe and ring to be placed on his son, signs of restored standing in the family. And yet the father goes further again, he orders the servants to prepare a feast of celebration by killing the fattened calf – most meals did not include meat, it was reserved for special occasions and parties. But the father commands that a feast be held to celebrate the restoration of the younger son.

We often call this parable, the parable of the prodigal son, **where we understand** “prodigal” to mean “extravagant, recklessly wasteful, generous in giving”, or “having spent everything”. We often equate this with being “wayward”, or “rebellious”,...

**of spending until you have nothing left, and in the younger son we see someone who has been prodigal.**

**But the parable also reveals someone else who is prodigal: **the Father**. At every step of the way, the father is reckless, extravagant in his love of the younger son, he holds nothing back and gives his all. And in this portrait of the father, Jesus is seeking to help us see the character of our heavenly Father: that He is reckless in His love towards us; He is generous; He is extravagant; He holds nothing back. We might be better to say that this is the parable of the prodigal father, even the prodigal God.**

**Often, when we call this the parable of the prodigal son, we end up shining the light on the son and so then comparing ourselves to the prodigal son,...**

**Where we risk superficial introspection, and maybe even a degree of self-satisfaction, because most of us are not as bad as the younger son.**

**But when we put the focus onto the father, then two things can happen. Firstly, we see a picture of God that can be very captivating, but equally unsettling, for we see a Father who seeks us out in our lostness, and wants to restore us to wholeness, to give us hope and a future, secure in His love, His seeking and prodigal love. And that is Good News, Good News for so many of those times when we feel lost.**

**Friends, does your picture of God include labels such as seeking and prodigal? If not, is it time to let Jesus, through His word, give you a fuller revelation of the Father?...**

**Is it time to come into knowing the love of God in these ways?**

**Secondly, when we put the focus onto the father, then we have to ask ourselves as His children, do we portray the Father's seeking and prodigal love to one another and to the wider world?**

**For example, 1 Corinthians 13 is well known for its description of love, but it equally portrays its opposite and the opposite of prodigal love. Whenever we lack patience, or are unkind, or when we envy, or boast, are arrogant or rude, whenever we insist on our own way, keep a record of wrong, or show irritability or resentment, then we are not showing...**

**the Father's prodigal love. And how many of those things, are part of your life?**

**When the spotlight** is on the father in the parable, then we see more clearly God's prodigal love. And when the spotlight is on the shepherd, then we see more clearly God's seeking love. This is a love we each need to know, and to show. I pray that in the weeks to come, God might by His Spirit, lead us deeper in our knowledge of His love, and nurture it in us as well. May it be so. Amen.