

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

15.09.2019
By Glenn Jordan

Introduction

Think about the last time you lost something valuable to you which was your responsibility to keep safe. What did it feel like to lose something valuable? If you found it again, what did the finding feel like? Did anything change for you from that point on?

Text

Luke 15:1–10

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.” Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Comment

Very recently I needed some documentary evidence to complete an application I was making. Actually, I needed two documents, but I could find neither, and to replace them both was going to cost me an amount of money I just couldn't afford. So I set aside a full Saturday to hunt them down. I searched the storage in the eaves

of our home, in the roofspace, even in the garage. I opened boxes and filing cabinets; I contorted my body into all sorts of shapes in dark spaces.

But by lunchtime I was beaten. There was simply no trace. And I was angry at myself, and a little embarrassed, even ashamed. I could find all sorts of useless stuff, but not the documents I needed, so I had to spend money to get duplicates.

Losing important things that I'm responsible for keeping safe is not good. It alerted me to my carelessness, my slackness and lack of due care and diligence. It showed me how foolish I can be.

It also makes me wonder about these two stories in Luke's Gospel. In both cases someone in a position of responsibility loses something that they are charged with keeping safe. In one, the shepherd loses a sheep, and a woman loses a coin, which may have been a part of her dowry, or that of her daughter.

The first story of the shepherd recalls Eze 34:1-6 and the careless, heedless shepherds of Israel. They don't take care of the flock while they indulge themselves. They have no concern for the injured or weak members of their flock; they are abusive and neglectful of those in their care; and when the sheep get lost or scattered no-one searches for them.

The occasion for the telling of this story is the grumbling of the religious leaders, reminiscent of the grumbling of the people against Moses in Exo 15-17. Jesus response to their grumbling about his dining with 'sinners' is to raise a question about the role of shepherds of the flock of Israel, and he does so by telling these two stories.

In doing so he raises questions about the proper response to lostness and the occurrence of a party in both stories is perhaps telling.

In the light of my very recent experience of losing something I should never have lost I find myself wondering about these parties that the shepherd and the woman throw for their neighbours. Why would they throw a party? It is surely not because the sheep or the coin have seen the error of their ways and returned to the sheepfold or the purse. (in what sense therefore is the 'application' of these parables applicable? Where in these stories is there repentance?)

It might be that the party is thrown because of the relief of the shepherd and the woman. They are culpable for the lostness; theirs is the shame for having fallen down on their duties. This culpability perhaps also explains the recklessness and urgency of the searches they conduct.

It is because of the finding that the shepherd is able to 'come home.'

These stories ask us to examine ourselves and our possible culpability for lost things in our lives. Lost relationships. Lost hopes and aspirations? Lost innocence? They also challenge us as to the lengths we are prepared to go to find restoration. The exuberance of the party is perhaps related to the burden felt for the lost thing and the urgency of the search.

But the stories also alert us to the tendency that may be in us to blame the lost thing for its lostness, and therefore to be like the bad shepherd who grumbles because something or someone is lost, and who spread the blame for that lostness everywhere else other than where it should lie—with the one who was charged with keeping it safe in the first place.

Response

Take a moment to reflect on the last time you can recall having lost or misplaced something of value. What was it? When did you notice it was missing? How did that feel? What emotions were stirred in the search? If it was found, how did the world change?

Having rested with these questions for a time, what effect has this reflection had on your understanding of God?

Prayer

God of all lost things,

If it is your will to lead us on such difficult paths, then we implore you, send us at least during these days and hours the Holy Spirit of faithfulness, steadfastness and perseverance, so that we can go forward in blind confidence, holding to the resolutions which we chose when your light showed us the path and your joy enlarged our hearts. Yes, in the midst of such loneliness give us a spirit of courage and determination.

Give us the unconditional confidence to know that even in these times of loneliness we are not forsaken by your grace, that indiscerned you are with us. Give us a spirit which faithfully recalls the past and your loving visitations; a spirit which looks forward to the tangible proofs of your love, that will come again.

When you grant us your comfort, let there come with it a spirit of humility and of readiness to serve you even when we are unconsolated.

Amen

(from Karl Rahner's "Prayers for Meditation")

