

Dorset South & West Circuit. Written Service.
Sunday 14th September..... Education Sunday. Lost and Found.
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Call to Worship. 1 Timothy 1:15a,17.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Now to the King eternal, immortal invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

STF 55

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unchanging, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might -
thy justice like mountains high soaring above
thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and
love.

To all life thou givest, to both great and small;
in all life thou livest, the true life of all;

we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
and wither and perish; but naught changeth thee.

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
all praise we would render: O help us to see
'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Prayers of adoration.

Heavenly Father Eternal, Immortal, and Invisible. We come before you today to delight in the promises of your wisdom and glory. We acknowledge that you alone are wise and deserving of all honour and glory. On this Education Sunday we pray that you would grant us the wisdom and knowledge to live lives that are pleasing to you and that bring glory to your name. May we delight in the unchanging love that you bestow upon us. To revel in the splendour of your eternal and immortal nature so evident in our lives and all of the world around us. Thank you that we can blossom and flourish as we learn more about you and your wonderful unceasing love. We give you our humble heartfelt praise. **Amen.**

Prayer of confession: based on selected verses from Psalm 51:1-10

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; Cleanse me ...and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. **Amen**

Bible reading. Luke 15:1-10

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbour's together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbour's together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Reflection

What's the smallest thing you have ever lost and after a good search found it?

What about the biggest thing you have ever lost and after a good search found it?

That's a good pair of questions to begin this look at what our bible passage is saying to us today.

Have you ever noticed that we often read about things and people in pairs in the bible. For instance in our story we have, 'tax collectors and sinners' gathering around Jesus to listen to him. Then we have, 'Pharisees and the teachers of the law, who are muttering about what Jesus does. And two examples are given, 'He welcomes sinners and eats with them.' We have listeners and mutterers.

We are only considering two of the three stories that Jesus told in this passage. However all three have the same message, 'lost and found'. I think this motif about pairing is a clever way Jesus gets us and His hearers into the story and to consider the contrasts of each of the pairs and, so, learn something about ourselves. Today is education Sunday and life is one long journey of learning. However there are some lessons that we might feel like we never learn. Lessons in life that we need to keep relearning. When we lose something and find it only to lose it again after a short while. We might chastise ourselves and ask, 'when will I ever learn?' Two stories out of the three Jesus told at this point. First the lost sheep, then the lost coin. We often see beautiful work's of art that depict Jesus with the lost sheep. However, I don't think I have ever seen a picture of Jesus with a broom! And yet I warm more to that story. The times I have swept the floor to find a missing tiny item! Or even had the contents of the vacuum cleaner emptied out to check if it had gone up into the bag. Both stories have precious items that are lost and then found. The sheep and the coin. Both just a small portion of the whole amount. When we think of the groups mentioned, they are probably just one or two individuals from the whole section of the office bearers or the community that they represent. So let's consider first the groups or individuals and then the things.

People:

We have two different groups of individuals: *tax collectors and sinners* and *Pharisees and scribes*. Which of these two groups would be called good and upright? Which is righteous in the sight of God? The Tax collectors, who regularly overcharged the people in order to enrich themselves? Sinners, that is, those who openly lived lives that were morally corrupt and against the Ten Commandments? Can we describe such people as good and upright? They certainly were not righteous in the sight of God. Then it must be the other group. The Pharisees were those who believed that by strictly adhering to a complex set of rules over and above the Ten Commandments they could avoid sin. The scribes were a skilled group of people who could read and write. They would record and interpret the sacred texts. Both groups lived and worked constantly in and around the temple. The Scribe were professional people and the Pharisees were an ideological group. So we have one group who could be described as the bad pennies and the other group who spent every moment in the temple and upholding what they believed was God's Holy law, are they the other side of the coin and righteous? The truth is none of them are righteous, they are all bad pennies. It's easy to categorise people and 'write them all off', but St Paul reminds us in Romans 3:23, 'for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,'. So if your thinking which of the pairings would I have been in, St Paul has some humbling words for us. We all, no matter how good enough, we might think we are, fall short of the glory of God. We used psalm 51 as our prayer of confession and this psalm was written when the prophet Nathan came to David after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba. David the great shepherd and king and yet he fell into temptation and sinned. Be careful if your instantly thinking 'well I might slip up, but I have not sunk that low!' Heed St Paul's words. I wonder what the tax collector's and the sinners were thinking about this other group that were openly criticising Jesus for mixing with them? Tax collectors still get bad jokes made about them today but they are unfairly treated as they are a necessary part of society that helps keep the law that provides necessities for our benefit. We might not agree with the tax system but we know that we need it. I wonder who would represent the tax collectors today? We definitely have sinful people just read the news headlines. Who would we consider to be outside the mainstream of society today, not welcome because we believe that they behave in anti social ways? Asylum seekers, refugees, the homeless? The scribes and Pharisees today might be those we describe as, 'jobs worth's', or 'know it all's'. People who have a keen interest in doing what is right but have somehow lost their true sense of purpose and become hyper focused on the minutiae. They can't engage with people without being hypercritical. I guess we all know someone who might fit into that category and who we do our utmost to avoid.

Yet who in our group's of people had their ears open and wanted to learn from Jesus? Where are we on that spectrum, when we consider those different kinds of groups. When we consider how easily we categorise someone. I think that is why true stories about homelessness like, 'The salt path' by Raynor Winn, get such a strong following. They take away our dehumanising of groups of individuals and show us that truly there but for the grace of God we might find ourselves. Or can you imagine what it must be like to risk everything to cross the English Channel on an overcrowded boat? Given no other choices would you don a life jacket, hand over your life savings, climb into an almost sea worthy vessel and come to a place where your going to struggle to get accepted and cross many many learning difficulties of language and culture? We need to really tune into what this contrasting of individual's means in this passage of scripture. If we are not to lose our perspective about how God sees each of us as individuals of worth and not another 'thing or person' that is a burden and a problem.

Things:

Now we are on difficult ground! In our culture we would not describe an animal as a piece of property. For some their animals are more important to them than other individuals. However in the story as Jesus tells it, it's only a 1% loss concerning the animal. The shepherd has ninety nine more! So why fret over one silly animal that gets itself lost!

We have another set of two, another pairing. The ninety nine and the one that gets lost. 1 & 99 which group are you finding yourself aligned with now? The ninety nine that are doing ok, or the minority individual that somehow has lost it's way? How does that help us to think about people as individuals and not just a group? I remember a very unassuming Deaconess who hearing us grumble about the queue for the bus on a wet miserable day, and moaning about how long it took etc etc. Quietly said, "I take those moments to look at each person in the queue and offer a silent prayer to God for every one of them. I don't know their names or needs but God does." Wow that lesson has never left me. We don't know what others might be going through, what reason they might have lost their way, but God does and each one is important to Him.

We always imagine the lost sheep cradled in the shepherd's arms. The story most likely reflects many a similar true tale. I wonder if in reality the shepherd might have been at his wits ends, worried sick about how he would explain the loss to his employer and possibly face losing his livelihood, maybe even having to pay for the lost property? Then he might have found it stuck in the awkwardest of places, had to risk life and limb to rescue it. Would he really want to cradle it or grab it by the scruff of the neck and get it back in the sheep pen!

I recall as a child when my Mother took what I thought was too long talking to her pals. I would wonder off and purposely get lost. Naughty! When she found me it was always a mix of emotions about the worry I had caused, which soon subsided into suffocating hugs and kisses. It was quite a shock to discover that my great niece liked to play the same game and it was a very distressing experience when she was left in my charge for the first time. The relief when I found her and the overwhelming emotions that sprang up, of affection and gratitude that she was safe. Many years later I still can't feel cross about that event.

In our call to worship Timothy wrote, 'Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.' God looks upon each one of us and rejoices that we are found in His presence.

When we think about the coin it was a tenth of the woman's dowery. We have probably all seen pictures of biblical women with chain of coins on their heads worn with a headscarf. They were part of a *semedi*, a beautiful headdress a woman would be given by her betrothed. It represented their coming marriage; it was a symbol of their commitment to one another. To lose one of the ten coins set in that headdress was traumatic. It simply would not do to wear it with a coin missing. Also in Jesus' day, the houses in Israel were not very big, and they were also very dark. Most were tiny and did not have windows to let in natural light. The floor would have been dirt, which can crack, leaving lots of nooks for a coin to fall into. Is it any wonder, then, that the woman lit a lamp and swept the entire house, not stopping until she found her precious coin? If it were only an ordinary coin, she would have let it go. But this coin, of course, was more than a small circle of silver to her. It showed that she belonged to someone who was the most important person in her life. It was also personal in the parable of the lost coin because Jesus shows us how *personal* His love is for us. You are not just a nameless face in the crowd; He focuses on you as if you were the only person in the whole universe. You are important to him.

Another pairing to think about before we leave our reflection on these two stories. Did you notice where the two losses happen? The sheep is lost outside the fold in the open air. The coin is lost inside the home. The third story that is linked with these two and makes up the trilogy of the stories told in this setting is of course the story of the 'Prodigal Son'. The boy who feels lost at home and even more lost outside and only finds himself found when he returns to his Father's waiting arms. The stories teach us that no matter where we might feel that we are, inside or outside of whatever circumstances. We are always welcomed into the waiting arms of our Heavenly Father. Who is constantly looking and searching for those who are lost and need to be found.

To go back to my first two questions about the smallest and biggest things that you have ever lost and found, how has journeying through this reflection on this passage of scripture focused or refocused your answers? What would be the biggest loss in your life right now and what would be considered by others as small and insignificant but to you it represents who you belong to and what is most valuable in your life. If you have faith? How big? As small as a tiny mustard seed. Thanks be to God for his love and grace.

STF 323

I will sing the wondrous story
of the Christ who died for me,
how he left the realms of glory
for the cross on Calvary:

Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story
of the Christ who died for me,
sing it with his saints in glory,
gathered by the crystal sea.

I was lost; but Jesus found me,
found the sheep that went astray,
raised me up, and gently led me
back into the narrow way:

Faint was I, and fears possessed me,
bruised was I from many a fall;
hope was gone, and shame distressed me;
but his love has pardoned all:

Days of darkness still come o'er me;
sorrow's paths I often tread;
but the Saviour still is with me,
by his hand I'm safely led:

He will keep me till the river
rolls its waters at my feet;
then he'll bear me safely over,
where the loved ones I shall meet:

Prayers of Intercession

Lord God We lose things all the time Our sense of humour, our sense of proportion, our sense of the value of things. Teach us to know what is of value and to hold it close.

Lord God We look for lost things all the time Lost dreams, lost relationships, lost faith. Teach us to keep looking and to recognise you, in the jewels that we find.

Lord God We find your love every day In the people we meet, in the sharing of stories and the growing in faith Teach us to be communities where people can find the compassion that they seek to be caring churches and your voice in our world.

On this Education Sunday, We pray that world leaders may be guided to see education as a source of hope for the future. We pray for all children around the world; that they may have the chance to change their lives for the better through education and look to the future with hope and happiness.

We pray for the schools and places of education in our area. We give thanks for the dedication, example and inspiration of school leaders, teachers and all who contribute to nurturing and supporting children and young people.

We pray for all who are sick, particularly those attending or working in our schools and universities, may they be restored to fullness of health or come to know your comfort and peace in their suffering.

We pray for those children who find going to school difficult because of their own suffering or the suffering of loved ones. We pray that they will find help and support in their struggles. So that they may be able to find a way back to education.

We pray those who are returning to schools, colleges and universities. We pray for their places of education to be overflowing with creativity, inspiration and opportunity. We pray for your peace to fill the classrooms and Lecture halls, the playgrounds and the hearts and minds of those who are worried about returning to the various places of education.

Lord Jesus, You came to earth as a teacher, Using stories to instruct. You commended us to listen more than we speak. Thank you for teaching us. We pray for the teachers, The lecturers, The mentors and wisdom bringers, Who enable learning to happen. We pray for the assistants and administrators; The helpers who ensure the students can flourish. We pray for the learners, As they absorb new information, Gain new skills and, Discover their particular route through education.

We pray for schools, colleges, Universities and all places of education around the world. May they be safe places, Filled with inspiration and aspiration. We particularly pray for those who have disappeared from the education system, Where circumstances have prevented them continuing, Where schools remain closed, Lord God, please make a way back to education for those children and young people.

We give you thanks and praise today for all in education And ask that you protect and uphold each one of them. **Amen. We say the Lord's Prayer.**

STF 440

Amazing grace - how sweet the sound -
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.

God's grace has taught my heart to fear,
his grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
God's grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,
his word my hope secures;
he will my shield and portion be
as long as life endures.

And, when this heart and flesh shall fail
and mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil
a life of joy and peace.

When we've been there ten thousand years
bright shining as the sun,
we've no less days to sing God's praise
than when we first begun.

The Blessing

May the knowledge of God's presence be your strength throughout this day, a source of wisdom, love, light, and grace. And as darkness falls may you find peace in that presence, and the gift of rest. **Amen.**

