

Sermon Notes Sunday 31 March 2019

Lent IV The Rt Rev'd Dr Murray Harvey

The rejoicing in each parable illustrates that because we have such a merciful and forgiving God, we can embark trustingly and rejoicingly on the journey with him. We know of his joy on the return of a lost one. Note too that it is not just the shepherd, the woman and the father rejoicing as *individuals*. In each case the **community** is called together to rejoice. The illustration entitled *People Rejoicing* (page 3) highlights this communal aspect.

In the light of the recent tragic events in Christchurch NZ, one of the positive things to come out of this horrific incident is that as a society we are beginning to get to know and meaningfully engage with the Muslim community. Previously they have been “lost” to most of us—lost in a haze of political rhetoric about immigration, Islamophobia and fear of difference, and in some cases, hate speech. How can we promote understanding and unity and celebrate the many things we share in common with this, our sibling faith community?

Today’s parables call us to **share in God’s joy** in dispensing mercy, forgiveness and welcome. How do we express that joy in our own lives, in parish life and in the wider community?

A prayer: O God who seeks and saves the lost, make us open to your call in our lives now and in the future, that we may know the joy of our homecoming and the welcome of your embrace. Amen.

MA Harvey 20.iii.19

Some Resources

www.loveyourneighbour.org has some excellent tips and ideas to help us break down barriers in our communities, as does the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre: <https://www.asrc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/ASRC-Words-that-Work-4pp.pdf>

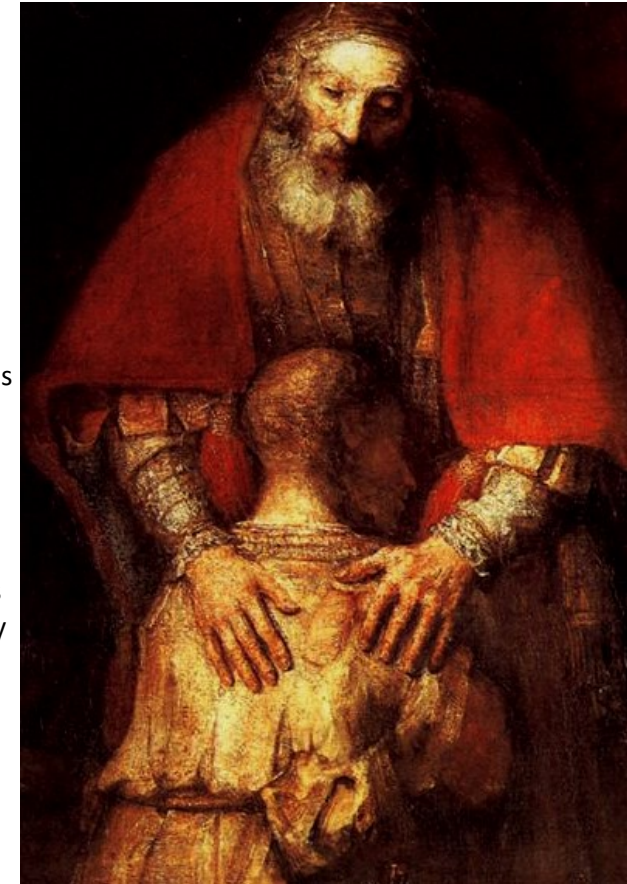
For study resources on Luke 15 go to: <http://www.bibleministries.org> and click on the Participant Guide for today’s date or visit Rev’d Dr Greg Jenks’ site at <http://gregoryjenks.com> and click on today’s date on the right hand side.

Notes.

1. GB Caird *Saint Luke*, p,182.
2. Scott McKenna, *Expository Times*, February 2016 p. 233.
3. Charles Spurgeon quoted in Scott McKenna 2016.
4. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 2015, p.104.

“But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him”
(Luke 15:20)

In the Parable of the Lost or **Prodigal Son**, also known as the Parable of the Forgiving Father, we see a wayward and greedy young man abandon his father, family and community for the ‘high life’. When this doesn’t live up to expectations, he finds himself broken physically, emotionally and spiritually. It was his choice to leave so he has no one to blame but himself. Every time I read the parable I’m amazed by the father’s loving reception of him on his eventual return. The welcome he receives speaks of God’s boundless mercy and unconditional love. It’s debatable how genuine his repentance is at verse 18. Many commentators write that his return home is more out of self-preservation than true repentance. This makes the welcome he receives even more surprising.



This parable speaks of the great depth of God’s welcome and mercy. Even if we return only because our desires have failed to bring the expected wealth and happiness, or because our sins didn’t offer as much satisfaction as we had hoped, or simply because we just couldn’t make it on our own, God welcomes us back! In writing about this parable the early Church Fathers said it was a parable about you and me. In the painting reproduced here entitled *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Rembrandt has captured the moment touchingly. The tired father holds his son

close in unconditional love. He lets his son's broken and tired body rest in his embrace. His immense red cape shelters him like wings. The father's response speaks of God's generosity in a number of ways.

Lukan scholar GB Caird says that the story is an assurance of divine mercy surpassing all expectations.¹ Scott McKenna of the Church of Scotland writes of the striking and scandalous generosity of the father towards his returning son.² Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon said that, in contrast to the parable, many a father who had suffered so badly at the hands of a son would have reacted quite differently!³ Pope Benedict XVI describes the meal that followed the son's return as a "feast of reconciliation and wholeness".⁴

We can all relate to the sense of frustration, anxiety, incompleteness and even panic when something or someone is lost. The gospel parables in Chapter 15 of Luke, of which the Lost Son is only one (the others are the Lost Coin and the Lost Sheep), challenge us to try to understand the reasons for these emotions and what lies behind them. Why has Jesus told these stories and what can we learn from them?

i. The **context** of the parables, coming as they do in response to verses 1 and 2 indicate that it is basically teaching about how God acts towards sinners. His mercy is as reckless as a shepherd who abandons ninety-nine sheep to recover one lost one.

ii. It is by implication that we learn about the **value** of the one that is lost (be it a coin, sheep or a son). Each of God's creatures has an immense value. Each is precious and therefore worthy of being sought out and found, at all costs!

iii. At a **personal level** we can relate to the parables. Losing something or someone means separation. The lost person or object is somehow outside our care and protection. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost son in particular illustrate that the lost one is somehow assumed to be in the darkness, to be vulnerable. Also, without the lost one, the whole flock or family is somehow lesser, weaker, incomplete.

While the three parables have many unique features that I have not mentioned, one of the main features that unites them is that there is **rejoicing** when what was lost, is found.



The **shepherd** finding the lost sheep: ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And 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." ⁷

The **woman** finding the lost coin: ⁹When 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."

The **father** on the lost son's return: ²²But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.

African Biblical scholar Paul Isaak writes that it should be renamed the parable of the lost sons (plural). The older brother, by refusing to join the father's joyous celebration, has himself become 'lost'.