

Sermon Preached at Alstonville Anglican Church
Lent IV, 27 March 2022
The Rt Rev'd Dr Murray Harvey, Bishop of Grafton



Return of the Prodigal Son, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, 1617-1682. National Gallery, London. Public Domain.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, or of the Lost Son, is one of the best known and most accessible of Jesus' parables. Personally I think that it's a precious gift to us and I always see it as a privilege to preach a sermon on it when it appears in the lectionary.

Whenever I think about lost things, I remember when my son was at school in Brisbane. Over the six years he was there he lost an incredible amount of things. I can feel my anxiety levels increase just thinking about it. School hat, several jumpers, cricket helmet, sports gear, mobile phone. He wasn't the only one of course. In the winter months so many boys lost their jumpers that the lost property department wiped their hands of the situation and just put a big wheelie bin outside for jumpers. He even lost his whole school bag once. I think I clocked up a record as the father or parent who visited the school's lost property most often.

Lost. We can all relate to the sense of frustration, anxiety, incompleteness and even panic when something or someone is lost.

The Lost Son parable is set in the context of a normal family with normal problems.

As always, context is important. The Parable of the Lost or Prodigal Son is one of three Gospel Parables in Chapter 15 - the others are the Lost Coin and the Lost Sheep. Together, they 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?

Coming as they do in response to verses 1 and 2 indicates 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.

I always find it fascinating the different names that exist for this Parable. The Parable of the *Lost Son*, *Lost Sons* (plural) or of the *Prodigal Son*. But it's also known as the Parable of the *Forgiving Father* – hence emphasising the Father's key role. 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 wealth and happiness we expected, 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.

Do you relate to the father, unconditionally loving and receiving back the lost child, or do you relate to the son, returning home after a period of selfishness?

I'm sure we can all relate to the lady who searched the whole house for one particular item!

Even if we don't have a farming background, I'm sure we can relate to the shepherd who searched for a valuable, vulnerable sheep!

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. When something or someone is lost, something in us is lost as well and there's a real grief there.

By way of possessions my mind of course goes to all the things that have been lost by so many in the recent floods. While we say that material things are not as important, many of those things were associated with precious memories and are not replaceable – there is a real grief there.

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: ⁵ *When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.* ⁶ *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."* ⁷

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

The **father** on the lost son's return: ²² *But 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.*

²³ *And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for 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 says that the older brother, by refusing to join the father's joyous celebration, has himself become 'lost'. (Hence he says it should be called the parable of the Lost Sons).

Archbishop Justin Welby points out that the parable of the Lost Sons doesn't claim to be the end of the story. Does the older brother eventually join the feast? Can the younger brother settle back into home and family life?

Yet the rejoicing in each parable illustrates that because we have such a merciful and forgiving God, despite the unexpected turns that life takes, the uncertainty of our lives, we can embark trustingly and rejoicingly on the journey with him. The Good News today from this parable is that forgiveness and mercy and unconditional love are our resources for the journey.

Today's parables call us to be a community that **shares 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.*

Some Resources

Regarding the community rejoicing together when ones that are lost are welcomed, 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>

Daniel Eng, *The Widening Circle: Honour, Shame, and Collectivism in the Parable of the Prodigal Son*, Expository Times 2019, Vol. 130 (5), 193-201.

Justin Welby, *Family – Caring for the Core*, Chapter 2 in Reimagining Britain: Foundations for Hope. Bloomsbury, 2018.