

Sermon Notes 14th Sunday After Pentecost 10 Sept 2023 Matthew 18:12-14
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When my son was at school I spent a lot of my time looking for lost things. He had a talent for losing parts of his school uniform and other personal items. The list includes his school hat, his cricket helmet, school jumper, various parts of his rugby kit, mobile phone. The wheelie bin outside the Marshall's office was well known to me. One day he even lost his whole school bag.

Today the gospel reading focuses on a parable: Matthew's version of The Lost Sheep [18.12-14]. When this parable occurs in Luke's Gospel it sits alongside the Lost Coin [v.8-10], and in the same chapter the parable of the Lost or Prodigal Son [v11-32]. These parables are properly understood together but I'll focus on the Lost Sheep as it is our Gospel for today, but reference to the others might useful too for comparison.

A story that helps me to reflect on this theme of one precious thing being lost is the tragic story of the young British girl Madeliene McCann. She was lost [or abducted] from the holiday resort in Portugal where her family was staying in 2007. We were living in the UK at the time and the amount of media attention the case received there was incredible, both at the time and for many years after. Many of us know how desperate a parent feels when their child is missing, even if just for a few minutes, let alone hours or days. The McCann family lived in hope for many years and are actively searching for young Madeliene. Another heart rending story (but which has a good outcome) is told the film *Lion*¹, about a little boy who went missing in India. We live in a world where many thousands of children go missing every day, mainly from refugee communities and developing nations where they

are sold as slaves in the sex industry, as child labourers or child soldiers. The UN says that immediately after a natural disaster, like the Asian Tsunami, the first people to arrive on the scene are child traffickers. This work needs our support and prayers as well. The efforts to address the problems of child abduction in our world are to be commended [read more about it on the UN website [Prevention, Prosecution and Protection - Human Trafficking | United Nations](#)]. In the face of all this, search for just one child (whoever that may be) may seem extravagant. Yet today's parable challenges us to the precious value of that one who is lost.

Verses 12 – 14 of today's gospel: Jesus told them this parable: ¹² *'What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?*

We can all relate to the sense of frustration, anxiety, incompleteness and even panic when something or someone is lost. Today's gospel parable challenges us to try to understand the reasons for these emotions and what lies behind them. Why has Jesus told this story and what can we learn from it and similar parables?

i. The **context** of the parable, coming as it does after the disciples' question, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Mt 18:1) indicates that it is part of Jesus' response to the question. Who is the greatest? Every single one is the greatest. Every single child or person, is precious and immensely valuable in God's sight.

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 this parable and the related parables about the lost coin and lost son. Losing something or someone means separation. The lost person or object is somehow outside our care and protection. The parable of the lost sheep in particular illustrates that the lost one is somehow assumed to be in the darkness, to be vulnerable (see illustration). Also, without the lost one, the whole flock or family is somehow lesser, weaker, incomplete.

As I said, we do well to keep the other "lost" parables in mind when looking at this one. While they have many unique features, one thing that unites them is that there is **rejoicing** when what was lost, is found.

The **shepherd** finding the lost sheep: ¹³ If he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.

The **woman** finding the lost coin (Luke 15): 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 (Luke 15) :

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.



The rejoicing says 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* highlights this communal aspect. In relation to the parable of the lost or prodigal son, 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'.

Happiness here consists in a willingness to **share in God's joy** in dispensing mercy and forgiveness. How do we express that joy in our own lives and in our parish life?

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.

Notes. 1. Lion (2016) <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3741834/>
