

Message for Sunday, 15th September, 2019

(14th Sunday after Pentecost)

(Luke 5.1-10, Jeremiah 4.11-12, 22-28, Ps 14, 1 Timothy 1.1-2, 12-19a)

There is much that could be unpacked in today's readings and I would encourage you to spend time with them at some point during the coming week.

Today we are intentionally celebrating the Season of Creation; we celebrate the bonds we share with all creation and hopefully in the process, we are ever more aware of the need to inhabit this earth more gracefully, more sustainably, caring for all aspects of God's wondrous creation.

In Luke's Gospel today we are gifted with two parables – the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin and these teaching stories are closely followed by the parable which we often call the prodigal son but could just as easily be called the lost son.

All three parables have the same structure. 'Lost, found, and finally, celebration'. We have heard these parables so often that we may not understand that those listening to Jesus would have thought, 'No shepherd would do that' or 'This woman is being rather obsessive about finding that coin'. And of course, in the parable of the prodigal son, no self-respecting Jewish man would have behaved in the way of the Father in our story, for it would have been considered demeaning for the head of a family to run toward his son in the way described.

Quite simply, the behaviour Jesus was advocating went against common sense and certainly the usual social conventions of the time. The point that Jesus was making is that God is not like us. God's grace and indeed Mercy come to meet us, to transform and change us. God seeks us out. We do nothing to deserve it.

In God's grace we have only to respond to the call on our lives. There is nothing we can do to make God love us more, nothing we can do to make God love us less.

The overwhelming message that we can take from these parables is the obsessive care that God has for the lost and the intense joy that is shown in celebration when whoever (or whatever) was lost, is found.

As we read these parables it is understandable to view them as very personal; to hear them as a story that has a message for how we as individuals try to live our lives and the relationship that we have with God and that God has with each one of us.

Depending on what is happening in our lives, we might think of ourselves as one of the 99 sheep left alone; we might be the one sheep that has gone astray that the shepherd goes off to find or indeed we might think of ourselves as the shepherd. The same could be applied to the parable of the lost coin and most certainly the lost son. Do we walk in the shoes of the father, the older responsible son, or the younger, wayward one?

Jesus taught in parables – he communicated grace through these stories. He chose images that the people of the day could relate to and understand. God's love, indeed God's grace, for each one of us is shown so clearly in these stories for they speak about the great joy that results in finding that which was considered lost; they speak of God's great joy in searching for and finding the one who is lost.

And who amongst us has not been lost at some point in our lives. This sense of feeling lost, forsaken or abandoned can take many forms and come from many different circumstances.

We may come from a family where love was absent for one reason or another. Some people's identity or sense of self-worth is dependant on achieving certain goals, studying for a degree to get that desired job. It could be that we harbour the dream of playing a particular sport professionally or for your country only to have your dream shattered; we may have been bullied at school and never been able to shake that feeling of vulnerability. There are so many ways that we can feel let down.

Spiritual writer, Philip Yancey, in his well-known book 'What's so amazing about Grace', writes that 'Occasionally, all too occasionally, I sense the truth of grace. There are times when I study the parables and grasp that they are about me. I am the sheep the shepherd has left the flock to find, the prodigal for whom the father scans the horizon, the servant whose debt has been forgiven. I am the beloved one of God.'

So yes, there is no doubt that the parables are personal to each one of us. However, they also hold much truth when a broader brush stroke is applied. We are today celebrating the Season of Creation, and the theme this year is the Web of Life.

We are called to consider just how important it is to see the interconnectedness of all God's Creation for we are part of a single wondrously complex web of life.

As human beings there can be no doubt of our interconnectedness, how our thoughts and actions impact others. The decisions we make in so many areas of our life, impact the lives of our neighbours, both near and far away. In the same way we are connected to all creation.

As Hildegard of Bingen wrote in the 13th Century,

Praise be to the Holy Trinity! God is sound and life, Creator of the Universe, Source of all life, whom the angels sing; wondrous Light of all mysteries known or unknown to humankind, and life that lives in all.

There is no getting away from it. When we fail to care for ourselves, for other people, for all creatures, for the earth which nourishes and sustains us, we all suffer. Jesus calls us to seek out the lost, for God's love isn't just for the chosen few. Everything and everyone matter to God.

In speaking about Jesus' parables, theologian Soren Kierkegaard states that they were not merely pleasant stories to hold listeners attention or literary vessels to hold theological truth. They were in fact the template for Jesus' life on earth.

'He was the shepherd who left the safety of the fold for the dark and dangerous night outside. To his banquets he welcomed outsiders. He came for the sick, not the well, for the unrighteous and not the righteous.' He came to bring hope to the poor, the marginalised, the vulnerable.

Time and again we hear this message. Theologian Henri Nouwen makes the point that "God rejoices. Not because the problems of the world have been solved, not because all human pain and suffering have come to an end, not because thousands of people have been converted and are now praising him for his goodness. No. God rejoices because one of his children who was lost has been found.'

This is cause for celebration for all. Today we will celebrate the beauty and fragility of the diversity of creation. Living in Australia, we know only too well the fragility of nature and the devastation that can occur because of natural disasters – the bush fires that burn are but one recent example of the need for us to care for our environment as much as possible.

Scripture begins with God's affirmation that all of creation is "very good", and as stewards of creation, we are called to protect and nurture its goodness.

The Season of Creation Advisory Committee urges us all to pray and work for justice for the vulnerable, (our fellow human beings and the innumerable animal and plant species that share our world) for it is they who suffer most deeply as the web of life begins to unravel. "Our faith calls us to respond to this crisis." The model that Jesus has given us calls us to respond.

We receive grace as a gift from God, not as something we toil to earn. And so, we can say with joy and celebration, the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son; these stories are good news. We are loved with a love so great that it is beyond measure, beyond our understanding. We have simply to accept the gracious gift that is offered.

Of course, the paradox is that once we know God's love deep within, we are called to do likewise, seeing God's love in all created beings, working for justice and for the good of our local environment and that of our neighbours throughout the world.

So, let us pray,

Gracious God, thank you for the gift of our lives. Help us to know deep within that all are worthy of your love; that you seek out the lost, those who might feel, for whatever reason, that they are not worthy of your love. May we each experience the grace of your mercy and compassion. Transform our lives so that we may reflect your love and grace to others and work for justice to ensure a sustainable future for our world. We pray in the name of Jesus, the one who teaches us to live in love. Amen

Acknowledgements:

Season of Creation Advisory Committee, Philip Yancey *What's so amazing about Grace*, Henri Nouwen, Soren Kierkegaard, Sr Kym Harris, *Pray as you Can*, Hildegard of Bingen