

Lost and found
Luke 15 & 19 v 1-10 4.3.18

Afraid for his life in the eye of the storm, human trafficker John Newton knelt onboard his ship and prayed to God for mercy. Later in the relative shelter of Lough Swilly he began to pen the famous hymn:

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now I’m found
Was blind but now I see!”

There is a rich variety of words and illustrations to describe someone who has become a Christian. Today we are borrowing just one word from Newton’s hymn – ‘found’. A Christian is someone who has been ‘found’ by the loving Good Shepherd Jesus Christ.

Once we were lost, wandering down dark, sinful roads, far from God, but in his relentless grace and kindness Jesus has come to our rescue. We have been found. Now we can come home.

The Pharisees and teachers of the Law refused to understand or accept how Jesus could befriend tax-collectors and sinful women. They regarded such people as outcasts to be criticised and condemned. But while Jesus always condemned sin these parables teach us that He and our Father in heaven are deeply concerned about sinners. Like a lost sheep, a lost coin or indeed a lost family member all sinners are precious in God’s sight. Jesus has come to seek, find and save that which is lost because of sin.

Observe here three things:

- ‘Found’ – a cause for rejoicing
- ‘Found’ – an occasion for forgiveness
- ‘Found’ – but at a cost!

In each case when the lost thing is found celebration breaks out. The shepherd and the woman invite friends to rejoice with them. The father calls for a special feast when his son returns. Jesus says the angels and even God Himself celebrates each and every individual who turns from sin and accepts the hand of the Saviour.

Every soul is precious. The shepherd is not content with 99 sheep safe. The woman won't rest until she has all her silver coins. And the father cannot be happy until both sons have taken their place at the family table.

It has been said that no other world religion sings quite as much as Christianity – This is because Christians have something to celebrate! Our hearts are made glad by the redeeming love and mercy of our Lord. We rejoice with the Almighty and His angels when someone repents of their sins and discovers the joy of salvation in Jesus. Ours is a happy, thankful religion, prompted by grace, fuelled with love.

Found by the Good Shepherd we have cause for rejoicing!

But the finding and returning of the lost is also an occasion for forgiveness. The first two parables emphasize the diligence of the Lord in seeking, pursuing refusing to give up on the lost and the subsequent joy in recovery. The third, the story of the Prodigal Son, is the longest, most detailed and most human of the stories. This gets to the heart of the matter and particularly addresses the attitude of the Pharisees represented by the jealous, resentful elder brother.

1st century Jewish listeners would not expect the father to let the younger son off so easily after wasting a fortune and disgracing the family name. But the father's compassion conquers all other considerations and he runs to welcome the shocking destitute shuffling hesitantly up the lane.

God's willingness to forgive our sins could not be illustrated more dramatically than this elderly man casting aside formality and braving the contempt of his neighbours to show his boy he was still loved and valued and most of all forgiven.

But notice how the father is doubly gracious. When the older son takes offence, the father goes out and pleads with him to join the feast. God welcomed tax-collectors but He didn't want the Pharisees to miss out. He forgives all. The challenge is for us to admit we have all sinned and be willing to forgive each other!

But notice a third and vital point here, that to be found comes at a cost. It cost our Master everything.

Good Shepherd that He is, Jesus came to seek and to save the lost but for the Lord to be true to Himself He had to be both loving and just. Someone had to atone for our sin for us to know forgiveness. So the Shepherd Himself laid down His life for His sheep. That's what was happening on the cross of Calvary. Jesus was paying the

bitter cost of human sin so that lost sinners could find our way home to God. Found in Him we are lost no more.

What does it cost us to be found like this? Nothing! The NT insists it is the free gift of God. Undeserved. Grace.

But it makes us want to change our lifestyle, sometimes dramatically! Witness Zacchaeus who unexpectedly finds himself entertaining the Good Shepherd. He is 'found' and, rejoicing, he commits to ethical business practice and radical generosity with his considerable wealth. Look what Jesus says, Himself rejoicing with the angels and the Father in Heaven: "Today salvation has come to this house" – this man joined the 'family of faith'.

When salvation comes to our houses we should expect change, for the better overall. The Lord 'gives and takes away'. He takes away harmful, dishonourable things but we receive back from Him far more!

It costs us nothing to be saved by God's grace but we will gladly surrender everything to walk the rest of the way home in the company of the Good Shepherd.

Amen