

## The lost and found

The closest I've ever come to road-rage was on the infamous Périphérique; otherwise known as the Paris Ring Road. Back in those pre-Sat Nav days, I found myself literally driving in circles, while at the same time descending into a near-delirious fury. In the end, I had to accept that we were spectacularly lost and surrender the wheel to my more even-tempered and better half.

Lost can be a frustrating, fearful and sometimes lonely place to be.

I'm guessing we've all been there – geographically, emotionally, mentally, maybe spiritually.

In our two parables today, we hear of a lost sheep and a lost coin. And as he so often does, Jesus uses these wisdom stories to challenge; to dis-locate his audience, in this case his fiercest critics, the religious elite. These self-appointed guardians of God's road-map, drew the lines that dictated who was in and who was out; who was lost and who was found, and, of course, they disapproved big style of the company Jesus kept. And so, Jesus tells these two stories. In the first he seems to be saying that God is like an unorthodox shepherd who seemingly abandons his flock to go looking for the one wayward sheep. In the second, God is like a woman who turns her home upside down to find that one lost coin. And the punchline to both, much to the God squad's disgust, is that when what's lost is found, a party is held in their honour; and in heaven angels rejoice.

In other words, Jesus is saying - I keep company with those God keeps company with... I take joy in those who know they're lost and are prepared to be found. Those 'rejects' of your religion are nothing less than God's treasures. And until you religious people understand that, you'll never understand; you'll never know the joy of returning; you are, if only you could see, even more lost than these.

And to those lost causes, the misfits, the outcasts; those who went where he went?

The writer Doug Gay puts it beautifully;

“Everyone who feels worthless, who feels no-one would miss them, who feels they have used up all the chances they deserve, who feels they can’t be worth much or else no-one would have treated them like this – here’s the dream of God’s kingdom – that they would come to believe their body and soul is precious, that their life is a great treasure to God, that they are worth finding, worth knowing, worth celebrating, worth rejoicing over. They would come to know that their life deserves repentance. That Jesus is for losers and for those who lose it and for those who are lost.

That in Jesus, God got down on her knees and lit a lamp and swept the house of this world and searched until she found them.”

All who know we’re lost; we are ‘worth finding, worth knowing, worth celebrating, worth rejoicing over’.

I have to say that I don’t actually believe anyone is ever lost to God. We may feel lost, but we never are. As Richard Rohr says, we are always in His presence; what’s lost, ‘what’s absent is our awareness’.

The difference between lost and found is waking up. I forget who said it, but the opposite of lost is ‘alive’. I love that.

Jesus knew, as Richard Rohr again so brilliantly puts it, that ironically ‘religion is often the safest place to hide from God’. When we obsess over rules and rituals, over right and wrong, over who’s lost and who’s found, then our lives are no longer living in the flow of God’s all-encompassing love. The essential function of religion (in Latin re-ligio) is literally to reconnect, re-align us with everything; to see ourselves and the world in wholeness, rather than *us* and *them*; *lost* and

*found.*

Jesus' trademark stories were designed to teach us all something about ourselves and about the nature of our God.

So, as I read these now overfamiliar parables, I need to reflect on what their challenge is for me. And, I guess, for me they are an encouragement to stretch the borders of my compassion; let go my need to judge others; to try to see everyone as the apple of God's eye; especially those I can't stand or understand. For me, it's also an invitation to allow myself to be found again... and again... and again.

And that happens, I think, when I allow myself to be open to change; to repent, which has nothing to do with penance, and everything to do with a change of mind, of heart, of how I see the world. The moment I believe I've cornered God is usually the moment I've lost him. So, I need to live and believe more gently, more humbly, more openly.

Parables are meant to mess with our heads; disorientate us; make us think twice; see differently. With that in mind, another way to reflect on these parables is to ask; what if the shepherd, the woman, isn't God, but you, me? Could it be that the sheep, the coin, are in fact God who demands that we search the familiar and the unfamiliar until we discover a new joy of finding, because 'God', again Richard Rohr, 'come to us disguised as our lives'.

Or, what if the sheep, the coin, are those who God is asking us to search out; move towards; to leave behind what's comfortable; to cherish, to help discover that they, too, are the joy of their Maker; the apple of his eye. What if we are the ones sent to those who feel lost, abandoned, stranded by life or by a religion that lost them?

In this week of suicide awareness, some of you may have seen this photo. It's of a desperate young man standing on the ledge of a bridge. And through the railings another man has grabbed his legs, another wrapped his arms around his neck speaking in his ear. Another holds his belt while others have threaded ropes through to keep him from falling. And I have to say when I saw this I cried. I cried for the hope that man had lost. And I cried for the God-like compassion of those strangers who found him and held him and wouldn't let him go.

We were all created to be part of the same flock – some of our sheep have, for different reasons, been forced away or abandoned. It's worth remembering that the lost sheep and the lost coin in the parables didn't choose to be lost. And they are, we all are, God's treasure, and God searches hills and canyons, gets down on her knees and dusts the hidden places, walks the loneliest bridges, 'the farthest corners, the ends of the earth' to let us know that we are all 'worth finding, worth knowing, worth celebrating, worth rejoicing over'.