

Listening to God speaking to us – through the World (Lk. 15:11-32)

By the time we reach today's passage, Luke has been building a theme that weaves together God's mercy and our repentance. Luke 14 opens with a Sabbath healing that brings criticism, and Jesus responding with the priority of saving what is lost. He goes on to speak of feasts and hospitality; of our need to respond to God's invitations with the deepest humility. He tells a story of a banquet to which the invited guests offer excuses and their places are taken as the host seeks out the: "...the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." (14:21b).

Then come hard words for his followers about forsaking family, giving up our possessions and carrying our cross. There are choices worth making if we are to follow Jesus. And some choices will be hard. We are to be like salt, flavouring the world for God. But if the salt has lost its saltiness, it is worthless.

So Luke ushers in our chapter; three parables about being lost and found: a lost sheep; a lost coin; and two lost sons. All three end with rejoicing. All three highlight God's will to rescue us. I know a little bit about being lost. And my heart sings, for I also know what it is to be found. Don't you?

"There was a man who had two sons..." Being lost begins as the younger son systematically unpicks and destroys the essential bonds and relationships that assured his place in the world God made. He demands his inheritance, sells up, travels to a foreign land and reinvents himself into the life and soul of all the parties until the money runs out. Then the world turns against him as severe famine sends his new found friends running and he ends up tending pigs that eat better than he does.

Jesus lays things on as thickly as he can. It is as if he wants to demonstrate in this story just how fully we can become lost. The son, in asking for his inheritance, effectively treats his father as already dead to him. Land was holy; God's gift of promise to the people he had chosen as a nation. This son obliterates all that roots him in that history, and dishonours the rest of his family in the process – some of that will haunt the story's ending. He thinks he's setting himself free, when truly he's setting sail for disaster and shipwreck.

As Jesus unfolds the scale of the son's failures many in his audience might have remembered that their scriptures had plenty to say about God's demand that children honour parents. Floating somewhere in the air as Jesus builds the details might be a text like Deuteronomy 21 that encouraged parents to drag errant sons to the elders at the town gate, to pronounce: "'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid." (Deut. 21:20-21). Jesus is setting up a story that cannot possibly end well.

It will not be so hard to listen to God speaking through the world, and to hear the saddest strains of loss. It seems to me that the more we love God, the closer we get to Christ, the more we love the world too; and the more that love makes us mourn.

Gathered here, we might each tell our own stories, and those of our congregations, of the deepest loss. Many voices across our world are shouting at us about just how lost our world has become.

Recently, we heard from Greta Thunberg a 16 year old's rage at the scale of the disaster the world's climate is facing, and at our failure to address it. That is our agenda too.

Last week, the United Nations published a report detailing the one million plant and animal species threatened with extinction, many within decades. It's authors wrote:

"Ecosystems, species, wild populations, local varieties and breeds of domesticated plants and animals are shrinking, deteriorating or vanishing. The essential, interconnected web of life on Earth is getting smaller and increasingly frayed. This loss is a direct result of human activity and constitutes a direct threat to human well-being in all regions of the world."

We know all too well what it is to be lost, and what is being lost. "Be like salt," Jesus says just before launching into his three lost and found stories. And, maybe, we tremble at how great the needs are, our own and those of the world. Sometimes I notice despair lurking not so far away from me.

How many of you are on Facebook? How many on Snapchat? How many on Instagram? How many on Twitter? Social media can be glorious in its interconnecting. I think it's truly a mission field. But I have repeatedly been stopped in my tracks at just how cruel we can be through the safety glass of anonymity on a little tiny phone. We know much about being lost.

Jesus knows it too, and finds God amidst it all. What is lost, can be found. What is broken, can be renewed. In Jesus, God has come not just to tell the story of lost and found, but to enact the story by gathering into God's very self all that destroys and all that kills, and overcoming it. As he weaves his story, Jesus can see ahead a waiting cross. And, a little further on, dancing from an empty tomb.

Being found begins in waking up; in seeing that there might be something more and better that can be. This son "comes to himself." As if awakening from a deep sleep filled with nightmares, he looks around and imagines that escape might just be possible.

Again and again we discover that the world around us can be filled with signs of hope. Of course, we want our congregations and our own lives to be such signs. But the work of the Spirit will touch us with hope and rumours of hope far beyond the Church. The prelude to this story, after all, is Jesus imagining a banquet at which the least expected receive honoured places. How might the joy and reality of such hope springing up across the world speak to us of God today? Wrapping himself in a rehearsed confession, the son heads home. The best he hopes for is some sort of labourer's status; he knows, as those listening to Jesus know, that he's destroyed all possibility of safe return to the family. At worst, he's fleeing famine to be dragged away and even stoned to death.

Jesus springs the first of his story's evocative endings. That banquet with the unexpected guests is entirely real and possible because God is the most outrageous host. As if on watch across the weeks and months and even years of having lost his son, this father sees him far off, runs to him (itself a further loss of dignity), hugs him close, kisses him, and cuts off the beseeching speech. Instead, the father throws a lavish party: "...this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And, Luke might be hinting given how the other two lost and found stories end, the angels sing as heaven rejoices.

Today's painting telescopes the story into a single frame. The father stands in the doorway, filling it so that entry is impossible without his action. He either lets the son in, or keeps him out. He shuts his eyes as does his son and the two of them merge into one another like jigsaw pieces designed, from the very start, to be together. The son's elbow pokes through his robe and an empty bottle, a hint of his previous life perhaps or a sign of thirst, pokes from his bag.

In the face of all that hurts around and within us, Köder's painting portrays God as Jesus does; longing to welcome the world home. What sort of congregations and denomination must we be to truly reflect this God?

Samuel Wells is vicar of St Martin's in the Fields in Trafalgar Square, a church that knows much of being a community of welcome and hospitality. He writes about the scale of the grace and gifts of God:

"...[God] gives his people more than enough. He overwhelms them by the abundance of his gifts. His people may respond in three ways. They may turn away from his good gifts, and strive to make a life on their own resources. This is the perversity of sin. They may find that their imaginations cannot stretch to the enormity of grace and, fearing that they might drown in the overflowing gifts of God, they reduce God to a manageable size and deal only with the gifts they can comprehend. This is ignorance... Or they can open heart and mind, body and soul to discovering and receiving these teeming gifts, and shape their lives and the lives of their communities according to the practice of embodying the abundant gifts of God." (*God's Companions: reimagining Christian ethics*, 2006).

Ann Morisy reflects much upon the churches of our contexts. She writes about us trying to be the Church when we may often feel bothered and bewildered in the face of the world's realities and the Church's inadequacies. And then she says:

"When confident in the economy of abundance we care less about being in control and we take more risks. This brings with it the capacity to let go of short-term advantage and commit to a longer perspective, where we are even less likely to be able to predict, let alone control, the outcome. Whilst in the economy of scarce resources we set a goal and pursue it, in contrast the process of church that is confident in a gracious, abundant economy will embrace a context in a way that assumes hopeful possibility." (*Bothered and Bewildered: enacting hope in troubled times*, 2009).

The father of this parable and painting seems, to me, to incarnate such abundant hope. What might that do to our personal and shared agendas today?

Of course, Jesus has a second startling ending up his sleeve. Köder paints it for us. The father's work of finding the lost is not finished. His elder son, enraged by forgiveness and grace, refuses to join the homecoming party. Jesus carefully changes the language: "this son of yours" (no longer "my brother").

Köder paints the tragedy. Dressed in identical blue and white to underline the bonds of family, the elder brother is the one most imprisoned. Whilst the father and younger son embrace in the open doorway, the elder son, hands clutched in rage, is squeezed into the corner, hemmed in by his own jealousy. Eavesdropping, he is lost. All over again, the father must shape and hold a forgiveness space.

Luke leads into this parable with stories about those who might expect a welcome at God's table putting themselves outside the scope of God's embrace. It is as if Jesus, telling his story, looks deep into our hearts and warns us of the fickle nature of our love.

Of course the world is a place of much sin and brokenness. Of course we who are faithful may be inclined towards naming the sins of others. Jesus invites us to also look to ourselves. He invites us to notice that God is more merciful than seems possible and more welcoming than seems prudent. He invites us to abandon control and neat salvation equations and delight, instead, in pure, unearned, unwarranted grace. He invites us to attend to the goodness and beauty that resides in the world even as sin and evil do their work. He invites us to hear God's voice and rumours of God's presence all over the place. Rachel Held Evans and Jean Vanier found those rumours and heard that voice amidst communities of the most broken and most regularly ignored. We can be converted again and again to the goodness of God that the Holy Spirit is weaving into the fabric of creation all of the time, everywhere.

Someone else who has listened to God speaking through and to the world is Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Out of days of tremendous loss, he wrote:

“There is no such thing as a totally hopeless case. Our God is an expert at dealing with chaos, with brokenness, with all the worst that we can imagine. God created order out of disorder, cosmos out of chaos, and God can do so always, can do so now - in our personal lives and in our lives as nations, globally... Indeed, God is transforming the world now - through us - because God loves us.” (*God has a Dream: a vision of hope for our time*, 2005).

Long ago I read a book that has never left me. From its title onwards it has blessed me time and again. It is a book about what God is up to in the world, and about what it means for the Church to join in, sometimes taking the lead, sometimes joining the movements others have begun, sometimes running far behind trying to catch up. The book is called *A Conspiracy of Goodness* (by Donald Messer, 1992). That's why Jesus came and told a story, and died and rose, and waits to see what we will do next.