

## Lost and Found

**Passage: Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32**

**Lectionary occasion:**

**Any time.**

Dear Reader,  
Thank you for choosing my service  
I ask you please to leave the sermon and readings as they are.  
The hymns should be OK but can be changed if necessary.  
The prayers will get dated - if you can do your own that would be good.  
God bless you.

**Lost and found**

God our Father, your heart is: big enough to go on loving those who have hurt you; generous enough to forgive those who turn back to you; understanding enough to reason with those who feel hard done by.

So we rejoice as we worship this morning, for we are those people, loved, forgiven and understood.

### **Hymn 19: With gladness we worship**

**Prayer:** Lord, we praise you for your power which holds us & holds everything;  
for your grace which touches & renews us;  
for your love that gives us life & makes us whole;  
for your sovereign will that maps out our journey  
& then gives us the freedom to choose.

Lord, we honour you for your holiness which measures our lives      And for your mercy that lifts us up and whispers, "You can begin again."

Lord we bow before you in love & adoration.

There is no God like you, no God besides you.

You are our God & we will have no other.

You are our God and we will worship you

with all we have & all we are, now & forever. **Amen**

### **Hymn 48: Thy ceaseless unexhausted love**

**Prayer:** Thanks for your Word, for telling what you are like in ways we can understand. For the stories Jesus told, which engage us & teach us. Open our ears & help us to listen.

### **Reading: Luke 15; 1-3, 11-32**

**Offering** Gracious God, we give you thanks that although you know us as we really are, you are waiting for us with outstretched arms, ready to bless and heal.

Give us that same generosity, and fill us with grace and gratitude that we too would be those who welcome, & not those who condemn.

### **Hymn: 38 Great God of wonders**

Jesus was a wonderful story teller who engaged his listeners with the simplest of tales, about things they were all familiar with - seeds, plants, birds, flowers - & families. Today's just like soap opera, isn't it?

But he didn't just tell stories for fun, just to gather a crowd & entertain them. There was a reason for each of them.

So why did he tell this story, or parable? It was in fact, the last & most detailed of 3 similar stories, dealing with loss & recovery.

There was the lost sheep, the lost coin, & now a son who was lost & then found.

But why the need for such a strong & reinforced message about finding what was lost?

Must go back to 1<sup>st</sup> verses of chapter. **Verses 1-3 (read again)** Jesus had an audience of 2 quite different groups of people; & neither group thought much of the other. There were the tax collectors, despised because they worked for the Romans & made themselves rich at the expense of their fellow countrymen, & there were other disreputable members of society.

Then there were the pillars of society, the good & respectable & religious ones, & they were complaining about Jesus not only talking to such people, but even sitting down & eating with them.

It was in this context that Jesus told the stories of being lost & being found.

So let's look at our family.

1<sup>st</sup> of all we see the younger son. He couldn't have been painted in a worse way. By asking for his share of his inheritance, he's as good as wishing his father dead already. His share of his father's wealth would not have been a nice fat cheque, but a portion of the family land & livestock. By selling off his share & converting it into cash he was bringing great shame on his father in the eyes of their neighbours. That kind of thing was just not done. Even before he's left home, this young man has behaved badly. But things get worse. He's squandered all his inheritance in wild living, & we don't need much imagination to guess what that might mean! This is another way of hurting his father for he is abandoning his obligation to care for his father in his old age. Then he finds himself destitute in a country struggling in a time of famine & sinks perhaps to the lowest place possible. For a Jew to have anything to do with pigs was unthinkable & unclean in every way - let alone wanting to eat their food. Jesus really could not have had this young man sink any lower in the opinion of his hearers.

Then, in the depth of his degradation, he thought again of the father he had wronged so much.

So let's look at this father, & we do need to think ourselves back into the Jewish culture of the day. A father would be a dignified & much respected head of the family & member of the community: what property he had would be under his control until his death when it would be shared according to custom, between his sons, & in his old age he could expect his sons to care for him.

So what kind of father is Jesus painting for us? A father who takes it on the chin when his son as good as wishes him dead. He knows the shame it will cause & the ridicule that will be levelled at him when he prematurely gives up half his property to his irresponsible son. With a son leaving home in that way many a Jewish father wd have said, 'he is dead to me. No longer my son, he's no longer part of this family.' Not this father. He becomes even more undignified in everyone's eyes as he obviously longs for his child to come back home. And on the day he sees him in the distance, he picks up his skirt & RUNS - something no dignified Jewish man would do.

Then, as we know, the warmest welcome, no recriminations & the biggest party, no expense spared.

How were Jesus' listeners getting on with this story so far? Amongst the self righteous ones, a lot of tutting, I'm sure. Neither the son nor the father were behaving as they should.

And what about the tax collectors & other outsiders? I guess some of them wd see themselves in that young man. And were they beginning to get the idea that maybe there was some hope for them? Could they somehow turn round & would there be a welcome for them.

But wait, our story's not finished. There's another son. And he's a good boy. He's worked hard & faithfully on the family farm all his life. He's never put a foot wrong, always done what his Dad wanted. He was a fine example of a good Jewish son - outwardly, that is.

But inside he was seething with resentment & anger, probably long before the prodigal returned. Daddy's boy had twisted their father round his little finger & had gone off without a care in the world while HE had been left with all the responsibility & none of the fun. To add insult to injury Father was putting on the most extravagant party, using up some of his inheritance. In his eyes his brother was as good as dead. 'This son of yours,' not 'my brother.'

Let's look at the father once more; again he sets all pride aside as he comes out of the house & begs his son to come & welcome his brother. Fathers did not do that, fathers issued orders & sons were expected to be obedient. He has set aside his pride & been more than gracious with the younger boy, & now he sets aside his pride & is gracious with the older one. To no avail. This son's seething anger & bitterness boil over in a rare act of defiance to his father as he refuses to come, he refuses to celebrate, & shuts himself off from his Father's love & grace.

The son who was lost has been found, but what about this one? Is he now lost? It would seem so.

So how were Jesus' listeners reacting now? Who was tuning in to the reason for telling that family story, where none of the 3 characters behaved as expected?

Was it those who'd rebelled, who knew they'd lived immoral lives in whatever way? Did they hear of a chance to turn their lives round? Did they hear of a loving Father God who always holds wide his arms in gracious welcome to all who recognise their sinfulness & turn to him in penitence? Were they looking forward to that great party in heaven?

Perhaps those self righteous people, who'd really thought they were upright & good & law-abiding recognised their critical & judgemental attitude, their joyless religious practice. Were their eyes opened to the fact that they were so quick to see what was bad & so unwilling to recognise & accept God's gracious love both for the outsider & for them?

The story Jesus told is unfinished. We don't know whether the younger son was a reformed character from then on. Nor do we know whether the older son was ever reconciled to his brother. But we can be sure that the Father's love remained constant for both his children.

The story has come down through the years for us to read. How does it speak to us? Maybe we have rebelled, gone astray at some point & still carry the guilt, feeling that God couldn't ever forgive us. Maybe we know we need to turn round & find our loving Father again. Father God is waiting & holds his arms open as he comes to us in grace & love with forgiveness.

Maybe we recognise the judgmental, critical nature in us that finds it hard to accept & welcome everyone unconditionally; we can't believe that God could actually love them as much as he loves us, no matter how good or bad they seem to be. Father God pleads with us to share in his joy over every repentant sinner.

The challenge of the story for us has surely got to be to model our life on the gracious, loving Father. In spite of all the ways his sons hurt him, he never stopped loving them, longing for them to be at one with each other, & with him. He freely forgave, he freely offered a welcome & unconditional love. And our Father God has freely forgiven us, & blesses us with his overwhelming grace & love. May we walk in his footsteps.

**Hymn: 538 O the bitter shame & sorrow**

**Prayers** Merciful God, meet us in the low places of our life,  
the unclean places, the arrogant places, forgive us we pray and bless us with the repentance

and the courage of the prodigal son.

Meet us in the resentful places, the judgemental places, the ungenerous places, forgive us, we pray and take from us the unforgiving traits of the elder brother.

Meet us in the loving places, the caring places, the hopeful places, and grant us the humility and compassion of the Father.

*Think of all those doing the lowest of work today, the unclean jobs, and those who are made to feel unclean themselves...*

Lord Jesus, you made time for the forgotten people, the unfashionable people, the discarded people.

We pray in your name for all those who lie like refuse in the streets of the cities of the world, in alleyways, in hovels, in gutters.

Cleanse us of all that would turn us away from their need, and bless them with food to sustain them, friends to support them, legislation to protect them, and love to surround them, day by day.

Lord God, we pray for those whose pursuit of wealth and happiness has brought brokenness and failure...

May they find their way home and know your welcome.

We pray for those who have turned their back on family and friends, and been changed and destroyed by addictions...

May they find their way home and know your welcome.

We pray for those who feel unfairly treated by their family, or their colleagues, and who have become bitter and resentful...

May they find their way home and know your welcome.

We pray for those whose spiritual pride prevents them rejoicing at the good fortune of others...

May they find their way home and know your welcome.

**Amen.**

### **Lord's Prayer**

#### **Hymn: 139 The Kingdom of God**

**Ben;** May you reach out to others as God reaches out to you.

May you welcome others as God welcomes you. And may God bless you in your bad times with courage, and in your good times with joy. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**