Lost and Found
Luke 15:1-10

Well this Chapter 15 contains three of Jesus' best-loved parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son. It's a wonderful trilogy on God's joy and God's grace in salvation. And even if you've not had much contact with church, you'll probably know at least one of these stories. And we're going to look at the first two today and spend a couple of weeks on the Prodigal Son from next Sunday.

And if you've ever wondered whether anything good can come from something bad, these parables should nail it for you, because all three of them come out of the grumbling of the Pharisees and Scribes. V2: 'And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled.' That's what provokes Jesus to tell these stories. But before we look at them, ask yourself, 'why are the Pharisees grumbling?' What's got their goat this time? Well Luke tells us in v1: 'the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him…. And the Pharisees and the Scribes grumbled."

It's because these two groups of people, the tax collectors and sinners, people not exactly high up on the list of most-popular-people in the eyes of religious folk, were coming to Jesus. The tax collectors, as we've seen before, were collaborators with the occupying Roman forces; so if you want to know how they were thought of, think how collaborators were viewed in occupied France during and after the second world war. And not only that, they also grew rich at other's expense. So think big-bonus bankers, and how they are viewed by those who have lost everything in the financial meltdown. And then there's this group who Luke calls 'sinners,' and they were those who were deemed to have forfeited any relationship with God and excluded themselves from good company and moral society by living lives unfaithful to God's laws.

So here is Jesus, and these people, who the religious leaders despised, were coming to him. And Luke tells us they were coming with a purpose: 'to hear him.' Which is interesting because, as Mark showed us last week, Jesus has just set out the cost of following him in no uncertain terms: you've got to love Him above every other relationship; even above your own life; you've got to take up your cross – and be willing to die to what you want for Him. I mean, no one could ever accuse Jesus of soft-peddling his message, and Jesus closes out Chapter 14 by saying (v35) 'He who has ears to hear let him hear' and the next thing Luke tells us is these people are coming to do just that, to hear him. The very ones the Pharisees looked down on had ears to hear.

Now, why is that? Why did these people, of all people, come to *hear* Jesus, while the Pharisees and scribes just grumbled and muttered *about* Jesus? And the answer is, they knew their need. These guys know that they are excluded, they feel that everyday, they know they're outsiders, and they know they need the community, the fellowship of God's love. And they see that and hear that in Jesus. And there is something deeply attractive about it.

Just cast your minds back a couple of weeks. In the parable of the great banquet, the master sends out his servant to bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame. And the tax collectors and sinners are responding to that call to come. Because you can be rich, just like these tax collectors and know you are poor, bankrupt on the inside. And you can be physically fit and leap in and out of bed

through a succession of partners, and know you are crippled and lame on the inside. And you can have perfect 20/20 sight, one of the world's beautiful people, and know you are the blind one who Jesus is calling to come. And these guys came.

But it wasn't just that they came that got the Pharisee's goat. It's how Jesus treated them, v2: "This man receives sinners and eats with them." Now, you've got to feel the biting sarcasm, the derision of "*This man*". They can't bring themselves to mention Jesus' name. "This man" drips with condescension. And why? Because He's prepared to share a meal with these sinners. Now, remember, the previous parables have been about God inviting sinners to come and join his banquet, to come and enter the feast, the party of the kingdom of God. And here is Jesus receiving sinners and eating with them. And in that culture, to eat with someone was to accept them, to recognize them, to welcome them. And Jesus is doing that for the very ones the Pharisees despised. No wonder they grumbled.

And in response to the Pharisees' displeasure, Jesus tells these three parables, and we're going to tackle the first two today. And I want you to see three simple truths that Jesus is making, which I'm going to call, lost, found and rejoicing.

Lost

How do you react when you get insulted? When someone says something good about you, you feel good on the inside, don't you? But if someone insults you, you feel just a little different. And in this first parable Jesus calls you – and me - a sheep. And that's not exactly the highest complement you can pay a man! A lion, yes, 'you're a lion!' but a sheep? I don't think so.

Now it's tempting, when we think of Jesus as the good shepherd and us as the sheep, to think of nice white fluffy lambs frolicking in the rolling hills. But anyone who knows anything about sheep knows that's not the picture Jesus is painting.

Sheep are not exactly the brightest animal in the pack, are they? Head down, they go from one patch of grass to the next, and all they're thinking about is the grass, so they don't give any thought to where their stomachs are taking them. The grass is always greener, on the other side of the fence, so they get their heads stuck in the fence. There's grass on that narrow cliff edge, so they get stuck there, or fall off and die. There's grass on the other side of that bog, so they get stuck in the bog. They're diseased and manky, and if you go walking where they farm sheep, like the north of England, you frequently come across their bones.

So when Jesus describes us as sheep, he's not saying, 'you're so nice and fluffy and I just want to cuddle you!' He's saying, we have this in-built tendency to wander; to stray. There's this inner desire to feed our souls on *something,* and that can draw us away from the sheep-pen. You see that with the tax-collectors – with they're desire for money and for more; and with the so-called sinners, with their desire to be free and to escape the rules.

So it's not just that we're sheep. We're lost sheep. These tax-collectors and sinners, and you and I, Jesus says, are sheep that have wandered from the fold.

They're lost, and we're lost and we need to be found, we need to be rescued. In Isaiah 53, the prophet Isaiah says, (v6) 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one- to his own way.'

But then in the second parable Jesus changes the image. There's a woman who has 10 silver coins, 10 drachmas, each worth about a day's wage. And she loses one of them. Now a days wage was a modest sum. It's not nothing, but neither is it a fortune. But it too is lost, and unlike a sheep, it's lifeless, so it has absolutely no way of finding itself again.

So as Jesus responds to the Pharisees and Scribes he's saying these tax-collectors and sinners, and by extension, you and I, are lost sheep, lost coins of modest value. And the Pharisees wouldn't have had much difficulty with that. But then comes the incredible point in Jesus' parables. It's not that we are just lost, we are also loved, and so can be found.

Found

V4-5: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing."

Any man would do that for a lost sheep, Jesus says, so how much more will God do that for a lost person. You Pharisees see these people as diseased and manky, feeding their souls on what eventually eats away at them; wandering off from the fold of God's care, and that's right, they have done that. But rather than leave them in that state God goes in search of them. Because they're not just lost, they're loved.

And it's the shepherd who takes the initiative here. The sheep is lost, the coin is lifeless and lost, but the shepherd goes searching and the woman goes seeking. And isn't it interesting that Jesus has a woman go looking for the lost coin, and not a man? Because if this was a man, he would just start yelling, where's my coin? I can't find my coin. Whose moved my coin? Come on, someone must have taken my coin. I can't leave my coins anywhere. But the woman takes her broom and lights her lamp and gets on her hands and knees and starts searching. Because God is a searching, seeking God.

The Pharisees, and those who are sure of their own righteousness, might wash their hands of such people, but Jesus says God is like a woman on her hands and knees, searching, looking. God is like a shepherd, seeking out the sheep, because he loves them and wants to rescue them and bring back in the sheep-fold.

Now, I suspect that most of us can grasp a God who would forgive, and accept us back if we were to turn back and try and make amends, and promise never to wander again, and prove that by good behaviour. We can grasp a God who dispenses *earned* forgiveness. But a God who seeks us out when we are still far away, who goes in search of lost sinners while they still have their backs turned to him, to bring them back into his family, what kind of a God is that? But Jesus says elsewhere in Luke (19:10), that that is exactly why he has come: for 'the son

of man came to seek and to save the lost.' And these tax-collectors and sinners, and you and I can be found because God loves you enough to search for you. Now if you're investigating Christianity, you might think, 'hey I'm searching, I'm a seeker' and maybe when you become a Christian, you think "I'm so happy I;ve found God." But then you read these parables and you realize that all along God has been loving you, and seeking you, and calling your name, and rather than you finding Him, He has found you.

And just look what happens when the shepherd finds the sheep. V5: 'And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders,' and he takes it home. Now, if you get lost and stop and ask a policeman or a passer by for directions, he doesn't need to sling you over his shoulder and carry you where you want to go, does he? You just follow the directions. Or if you have a dog and it gets lost and you go out and find it, he'll most likely come running up to you, and you just have to point him in the right direction and he gets his bearings and he's off home. But this sheep needs to be carried home. It has no strength of its own, it's too weak to return on its own. The shepherd picks it up and carries it home.

Which tells you that being found, being saved is not about us just looking to Jesus as a good moral teacher, or as our example, and we can find ourselves, and save ourselves, and improve ourselves if we are just shown the right way and follow the right directions for life. And it's not that the shepherd shows the sheep how to come down from the cliff edge and wash itself clean and then gives it a map to find its own way back to the sheep fold. No. The shepherd launches the rescue, and the shepherd finds the sheep and the shepherd carries him home on his shoulders. You see, being found and being saved and coming back to God's fold are by God's grace. The sheep doesn't do anything. The shepherd does everything. The sheep just lies there and gets carried. But if these Pharisees and Scribes, had their way the tax collectors and sinners would have to do a long-list of things before they could hope to redeem themselves. And it's the same with moralistic religion. But Jesus says, the shepherd searches them out and finds them and then carries them home. It's not what they or you and I do to be saved that counts, it's what Jesus does for you.

But how does that work? How can Jesus bring us home? How can Jesus take a bunch of people like the tax-collectors and sinners, and you and I and bring us safely back to the sheepfold, without dismissing the sin and the wandering away, without just saying, 'o that doesn't matter, I ignore all that, we can just pretend that didn't happen?' In the words of the apostle Paul, how can God be both just, and the one who justifies? Well, Isaiah, offers us a glimpse of how God would do it: Isaiah 53:6 again, 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.' The shepherd doesn't just carry the sheep on his shoulders, he carried the cross. As John the Baptist put it, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world; the Shepherd became a sheep, the shepherd became the sacrificial Lamb, who carried our sins in his body, on his shoulders, at the cross. God gave up His greatest treasure, His Son, to make us, of far less value, his treasured possession.

And when the measure of God's love for you sinks in, when His seeking for you, and finding of you, and the cost He paid for you dawns on you, then just as surely as the sunrise breaks upon the mountains, joy will break upon your heart. Lost, found, rejoicing.

Rejoicing

Ask yourself the question, why do the Pharisees and Scribes reject and exclude the tax collectors and sinners? Now there are a number of answers to that, but one reason is, because it feels good. It feels good to have others you can look down on. There is a certain inner joy, an inner 'feeling-better-about-yourself' when you have made it, and others haven't. When you are in and others aren't. CS Lewis, in his book *That Hideous Strength*, describes the phenomenon of Inner Rings. He says we have this 'inner compulsion to be on the 'inside' – we have this 'need to become a member of the elusive and desirable group' (Cameron and Rosner, 78). And this Inner Ring, this group of people who are 'in', exists for exclusion. 'There'd be no fun' Lewis says, 'if there were no outsiders…. Exclusion is no accident: it is the essence.' And as a result, Lewis says, 'of all passions,' this 'passion for the Inner Ring is most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things.'

You see there is a gated community of what we might call the righteous, or self-righteous. And there is a certain joy of being on the inside and knowing that others don't make the grade; that others are excluded; that you are better than them. Here of course it's the Pharisees who are in and the tax collectors who are out. They feel good about themselves, but that is built on others not making the grade. But what is it that gives you or me a sense of joy, a sense of having made it, a sense of being in the Inner Ring? Or, what is that Inner Ring that you're trying to get in, that you think will give you significance and value and inner joy if you could only attain it? Maybe that's your family. We love our families and that's right, but what if the joy that comes from having a strong family is really based on knowing that you've succeeded where others haven't, and you feel good *in comparison*. Or your career success – you get an inner kick out of having climbed the ladder and made it into this Inner Ring, into the board room, you've made it, you're one of them, but does that kick comes out of knowing that others haven't made it? You're in and they're out. Or if you're politically minded: isn't there a certain sense in which we feel good about ourselves because we are conservative, or liberal, and not like those terrible liberals or conservatives? It's the moral superiority, the joy, that comes from believing you're in the right Ring.

So there is this joy in being in the Inner Ring, in being in the Gated Community of the Righteous. But Jesus is building a very different kind of community. He's building a community that is based, not on what you have to achieve and attain to be in, but one that is built on people who have experienced grace. People who know they need grace. People who know they don't deserve to be there. A community of the lost who know they have been found. A community marked not by joy at excluding others, but joy at welcoming others.

You see, the Pharisees might be grumbling, but all three parables in Luke 15 are overflowing with joy. There's the shepherd rejoicing as he carries his sheep,

calling his neighbours to 'come and rejoice with me'; there's the woman, so happy to find her coin she calls her friends and neighbours to come round for a party; and there's the Father who throws a feast for the town when his lost son returns.

Sure, the Pharisees found their joy elsewhere. But Jesus is saying, find your joy in grace. Find your joy, your inner sense of wellbeing, your overflowing happiness, find it in grace, find it in God's undeserved, unmerited love for you and for others. And the reason you can do that is because *God* takes joy in grace, in the lost being found. In v7 Jesus says, 'There will be more joy *in heaven* over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.' V10: 'There is joy *before the angels of God* over one sinner who repents.' And did you notice that the joy is before, in front of, the angels? And what or who is in front of the angels, who are angels looking at in heaven? God! God our Heavenly Father rejoices, He takes joy in lost people being found and coming home.

But how does Jesus know that? How does Jesus know what goes on in heaven when a sinner repents? Because He's come from there. Now, we're not a very politically correct bunch in our home group, but we do have two Germans, Matthias and Petra, and last week we were joking about what they eat over there in Germany; which, as every Englishman knows, is sausages and pickled cabbage. Now, saying that just displays my ignorance. But Dinah, who's originally from Ghana, has actually lived in Matthias' hometown and she knows things about that place, and in particular it's public transport system, that only someone who has lived there could know. She's got insider information. And here is Jesus speaking as one who knows, who has seen, who has witnessed, who has experienced what happens in the heart of God, when the lost are found and brought home. What a claim for who Jesus is!

And Jesus is saying to the Pharisees and to us: leave your grumbling and join in God's joy. Our joy in His grace to us and to others can find its source in His joy. And His joy is not in this group over against that group, it's not in the so-called righteous over sinners or even in sinners over the righteous, His joy is in redeeming, rescuing grace. If you've never experienced that joy, maybe you've never been found. But as soon as you realize you've not been found, and you acknowledge you're lost, you can be certain that the Shepherd is right at hand seeking you out, that you might know His joy.

So when the Pharisees say, "This man receives sinners and eats with them", they meant it as a complaint. We can take it as a compliment. Because, thank God, that is just what Jesus does! He receives sinners and He eats with them.