Trinity 14 22 Sept 2019

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

I sometimes get really irritated with the lectionary. For those of you who aren’t sure what that word means it’s the list of readings set for each service throughout the church’s year. It has a habit of editing the sex and violence out of Bible stories, breaking up sections that only make sense as a continuous whole into bite-size chunks, and simply jumping about.

Last week’s Gospel reading began at the opening of Luke Chapter 15 – the verses I’ve just read. We heard the story of the lost sheep (verses 4-7) and the lost coin (verses 8-11). You’d think that this week we would be hearing the next bit of Chapter 15 from verse 12, but instead we have jumped 20 whole verses to the beginning of Chapter 16.

So what have we skipped?... The story of the prodigal son. This is sheer madness because this series of stories are one of a piece and in order to follow the argument they need to be read together:

1. The lost sheep
2. The lost coin
3. The lost son
4. The lost manager

They are all told in response to the charge ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them’ – a charge that was made repeatedly against Jesus because he repeatedly engaged in this behaviour. The Greek tense makes it clear; it wasn’t a one-off. It kept happening.

The issue is that Jesus – who claimed to be a holy man - spent his time with unholy people. He either knew what sort of people these were and was simply reckless or he was duped by their hard-luck stories and was pathetically naïve.

These folk were probably a mixed bag, but they are often described in a kind of shorthand as prostitutes and tax collectors. These were particularly tainted professions because they serviced the Roman occupying forces. Prostitutes and tax collectors were collaborators, and dirty collaborators at that. We associate illicit sex with dirt. Freud pointed out that we do the same with money: recall the phrases ‘filthy rich’, ‘dirty money’ and – a good northern one - ‘where there’s much there’s brass.’ So the charge against Jesus was that in consorting with such people he was making himself unclean.

Jesus answers this charge by re-framing ‘doing wrong’ as ‘getting lost’, and in so doing he removes some of the moral censure from these folk. He tells four stories that are each about losing and seeking; with each story coming at the issue from different angles. The first two – the lost sheep and the lost coin - take the perspective of the one who is searching. This is especially evident in the case of the searching woman because, while you might tell the story of the searching shepherd from the perspective of the sheep you can’t tell the story of the searching woman from the perspective of the coins. The focus of them both is God; and their point is that God is prepared to go to any lengths, indeed to behave recklessly, in order to retrieve something uniquely precious that he has lost.

The next story, the lost son, is much longer and more detailed, and its centre – the reunion between the father and son forms the centre of the whole series. This story, like the previous two, is told from the perspective of the one who is searching; but this time it also brings in the perspectives of the two sons; the one who was lost and the one who stayed put. We start to get a feel of what it was like to be lost and found – and notice that the lost son got very dirty – first with prostitutes, then by hiring himself out to a foreigner, and finally with pigs. Yet we are not told that his father made him have a shower before he hugged him. You could say of the father in this story, ‘"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Finally, we have today’s Gospel which, in a 180 degree turn, is told exclusively from the perspective of the one who is lost. And there’s no doubt that this is a money-grubbing individual. The lost manager and the lost son have a number of other things in common. The Benedictine father who taught me Greek used to say that they both engage in what he called ‘the deliberative monologue of the antihero.’ By which he meant that they were dodgy characters who thought out loud.

This is quite unusual in the Bible. We are often told what people did and said, but much less often what they thought, and even less often how they came to certain decisions. But with these two we are. The lost son is hungry, he remembers that even slaves get enough to eat back home, and he decides to get up and return with a prepared speech that he hopes might gain him re-entry. The lost manager realises the game is up and he’s going to get the sack; he dismisses the options of manual labour or begging and instead decides on a strategy of schmoozing members of his community – using money (perhaps his own master’s) to oil the wheels.

Both of these men are desperate. The first is starving, the second is staring destitution and starvation in the face. There is no welfare state, even a broken welfare state like ours, to offer them a safety net. Both are prepared to do what it takes to stay alive. Neither of them has high motives. The lost son does not reflect on the way he has hurt his father, he only reflects on the fact that he is hungry. If he has to say sorry to get what he wants he will, but it is hunger not remorse that drives him. The lost manager is even more clearly engaging in underhand emotional bribery.

Yet the father does not condemn the lost son and astonishingly Jesus actually praises the lost manager. In doing this he signals that, while his seeking out and saving the lost is passionate to the point of recklessness, he is not at all naïve. He knows all about the low or mixed motives of the sinners who draw near to him. He knows they are desperate people who are hoping that there will be something in it for them. The motives aren’t important, it’s the reaching out, and the turning to, above all it’s the homing instinct.

Hidden away in all four stories of the lost and found is a little Greek word: *oikos.* It’s easy to remember because it’s a brand of Greek style yoghurt. *Oikos* means house or home (so I guess the idea is that the yoghurt tastes home-made).

We are told that the shepherd brings the lost sheep home; that the woman is at home and sweeps it out in her search; the shepherd, the woman, and the father of the lost son all throw a party in their homes – and in the story of the lost son there is an argument on the threshold of the home in which the father invites the older brother to come in to the house. Finally, why does the lost manager schmooze his neighbours? He hopes they will ‘welcome me into their homes.’ This reminds us that the lost son and the lost manager are not just facing starvation, they are homeless.

Faith is fundamentally a homing instinct; it’s driven by a hope, however faint, however desperate, that if we reach out someone will take our hand and lead us home. One of our Gospel readings from earlier in the summer, the story of the rich fool, was told by Jesus to show how the opposite - turning inwards – expressed in the complacent stockpiling of supplies and an ‘I’m alright Jack’ attitude is futile. We are social creatures, we need to connect with others; we are limited creatures, we will only function if we are part of a bigger community; above all we were created to commune with God. As St. Augustine wrote:

‘You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless ‘til they find their rest in you.’

That restlessness, that homing instinct may not look holy at all. But it’s the mark of the divine in us, what the Bible calls faith.

When Elizabeth Thomson was with us she introduced me to these lines by the poet Robert Frost:

 “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, They have to take you in.

Maybe home has not been like that for some of us, but it’s what Jesus means when he talks of home; it’s what he offers us now and after death. And he calls us to reckless hospitality, to building a house where love can dwell, and a place that all can call home.