

Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son

Do you think she did it? I have been asked that question on at least two occasions this week. Do you think she did it? I am, of course, talking about the speculation and fascination that surrounds the parents of this poor little girl who has gone missing. Did the mother accidentally kill the daughter, then attempt to cover-up? And people are just gripped by the story. You almost have the feeling, in the media and its readers, that they want some sordid outcome.

In fact, right the way through the way in which the media have dealt with this story strikes me as quite bizarre, but as the story develops, once again the way it is dealt with is a thermometer of the health of modern Britain. A sustained focus remains upon an incident that is tragic anyway – but then the gossip, and the unacknowledged hope that the parents might be guilty of some hideous crime, says more about our interest in this than it does about the parents. With all the horrific things that happen in the world every day – why has this story grabbed and held our attention?

It is precisely the attitude embodied by the Pharisees that are criticising Jesus at the beginning of Luke chapter 15. They are upset because this man welcomes sinners and eats with them – not that they come out directly and say it, but rather ... they murmur! This Jesus, who is whiter than white, they want him to be revealed as a sinner. This pharisaic desire to condemn others was easy to see in the rabbinical writings of the time, where a good Jew would not even associate with the sinner, with the people of the land. So, when Jesus arrives, and he is eating with them, that is, showing hospitality to sinners – it means that he is not the good person we thought he might be after all. How can he be from God if he welcomes sinners?

And so we have three parables in Luke chapter 15 that Jesus tells in response to this attitude. They are generally known as the parable of the Lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son. And you can see why, because this is how they belong together. But already, even with those titles, the focus has shifted away from the focus of each of the parables. The parables concentrate not upon the thing that is lost, but on the person who is doing the looking, to say that this is what God is like. In fact, there is a kind of Trinitarian doctrine here,

God the father, the son and the holy Spirit, is described as God the shepherd, God the woman, and God the wasteful father. The picture that this chapter paints of God, is one that is utterly unlike anything that the Pharisees could tolerate, and at the same time it is completely in tune with the harmony that echoes throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

My father is coming to Bloomsbury this week to look at our ecological policy – he is an engineering consultant, and for as long as I have known him he has always been very smart, very professional, and very dignified. And you can see just how much I take after him in this respect. But when I was growing up, I can remember my little brother going missing. It was not a rare thing for him to be home an hour late, but it was exceptionally late, and he had gone to a local lake area where someone had recently drowned – so the family were all very worried. So my dad jumps anxiously onto his bike, and cycles off in the direction of the lake.

He returned an hour or so later, covered in bruises, scratches, and with various different plant species sprouting from various parts of his anatomy. He had fallen off his bike, and down a steep bank consisting of thorns, and bracken. And he walked through the back door, looking bedraggled and not in the best of moods – and of course my brother, was sat at the dinner

table, merrily munching away with the rest of us. Okay – what happened next could hardly be compared with joy in heaven – but the important point is this. That a loving father abandons comfort, and dignity in order to look for those he loves. And before my 10 year old eyes, was the perfect picture of the father who has abandoned his dignity for the sake of his son.

Historical Reference Points

The pictures created by these two parables, portrayed a God that was inconceivable to many of the Pharisees. God is a God of justice, that is – you get what you deserve. That, after all, is what justice is! People getting what they deserve. So the idea of Jesus welcoming sinners, meant that he was giving people what they did not deserve. But what Jesus offers in these two pictures is a different notion of justice. Far from simply a distant God who is firm but fair, dishing out to people the punishment that their sins deserve, we see a God for whom justice rather means putting the world to rights. And that is the New Testament basis for justice – the justice of God means putting the world to rights. And it comes out in these two parables.

Firstly is the parable of the lost sheep. The first thing to notice here is that God is being compared to a shepherd. Shepherds were not highly thought of in Israelite society. Their word could not be trust in court – they were not to be believed (which makes the Christmas story very interesting, given that the first to witness the birth of Jesus were the shepherds whose word could not be trusted.) A shepherd is an unlikely image of God – what is more, a shepherd who frantically goes in search of his sheep. Most villages would own about a hundred sheep – and losing one of them was a serious business, so there would be rejoicing when the shepherd bounds over the hillside carrying the lost sheep.

Secondly, there is the parable of the lost coin. The most important thing to notice here, is that God is being compared to a woman! Not one of those important dignified people, but a woman who has lost a coin. The picture created is that of a peasant woman, who has lost a coin worth more than a day's wages. And what is more, she is a frantic woman, turning the house upside down until she finds this lost coin. But of course, when she finds it, she is enormously relieved. The fact that she had 10 silver coins, in all likelihood refers to her dowry – coins that she had needed to skimp and work and save and sacrifice in order to get – they were usually stores in a necklace, so losing one of them was a disaster. But when she finds the lost coin, she rejoices with her friends.

In both of these cases, the picture is of sorrow turning into joy. I had a friend staying with me this weekend. His wife and daughter had stayed at home at their Birmingham house. But there was no end of anxiety on Friday, because the house keys had gone missing. And Kathryn had searched the house top to bottom. It was worrying not only because of the inconvenience of it all, but because if they had been taken out of the front door, it may mean that the house could be burgled – and with the father being away there was the thought that it might just be best if he went home. But at bed time, as 2 and a half year old Molly is being put to bed, the sheets are pulled back to reveal the bunch of keys, lying cleverly hidden in her bed. Yes, there was much rejoicing. And the rejoicing goes on beyond the person that has found them, to affect all that had been affected by their loss. This is precisely the case in the parables, that the rejoicing is a rejoicing that affects the community.

Instead of complaining that Jesus was welcoming sinners and eating with them, the Pharisees ought instead to have been rejoicing that sinners were repenting, returning to God. Rejoicing that God is not a God who sits there angrily twiddling his thumbs waiting for sinners to repent – but that God is one who abandons his comfort, and his dignity – and as would be seen in the person of Jesus, a God who abandons his life to go and look for those who were lost.

Application

With the benefit of hind sight, it is easy to look at the Pharisees, and thank God that we are nothing like them. But I wonder what picture of God we create. First of all, there is this human capacity to assume the worst of others, almost to will that others are very bad and deserve to be punished! Do you think she did it? And there is always going to be a strong relationship between the God that we believe in and the way that we treat other people. If we believe in a God who can't wait to punish people, then our basic position towards others will be one that is judgemental. Or – conversely, if we enjoy thinking the worst of others – then the God that we worship is likely to be a God who behaves the same way.

But these parables tell a different story. They tell us of a God of justice, not smugly dishing out eternal punishments, but a God of justice who is putting the world to rights. They tell us of a God who abandons his dignity and his comfort – and ultimately – his life, to seek and save those who are lost.

Equally, we might be a bit more liberal. We might think – well, God is good, so he is not going to be involved in nasty things like judgement – so sin doesn't really matter that much. I know of a minister and theologian who, half way through an extra-marital affair – declared that God is not interested in what happens in the bedroom. And if that is the sort of God that I believe in, then of course – I can enjoy all the things that I want to and it won't matter.

But these parables tell a different story. They tell us of a God to whom sin, and brokenness and pain does matter. A God of justice, that is, a God who is going out of his way to put the world to rights. A God who abandons his comfort, and his dignity and his life to seek and save those who are lost.

This is what we see in the Old Testament reading.

A picture of a God who is putting the world to rights – of a God who is a God of justice, and who is poised to destroy everyone except Moses, but who – in the end, shows mercy. I find it difficult to imagine that God actually changed his mind. Because over the course of Scripture, God's character seems to change. It is more likely the people of God who change. We will soon see all the adverts for Christmas – and sometimes, when the adverts for girls toys come on, I do my best to convince the boys that that is what I will get them for Christmas. It is not just teasing them – but to remind them that what comes to them at Christmas is a gift. And in the end, they change my mind – and I say, Oh alright then – we'll look for something else.

Moses is no teacher of God, but God enters into an exchange with Moses, that highlights both Moses' commitment to his people and God's commitment to Moses and His people. The Exodus is in fact, the foundational moment of the Old Testament – it speaks of a God who leads his people to freedom, despite their best efforts to throw it back in his face. If justice means just giving people what they deserve, then that story ends on Sinai. But if Justice is God putting the world to rights, then it is a story that we are a part of.

The God that we worship, is not some dignified God sitting safely atop a cloud, clapping with approval at good people and raging with anger against bad. The God that we worship is a God who sees who we really are.

This is a God who sees who you really are. This is the God that we worship:

A God who abandons his comfort, and comes looking for you.

A God who abandons his dignity, and comes looking for you.

A God who abandons his life, and comes looking for you.