

LOST SHEEP, LOST COINS

Jesus welcomes outsiders to table fellowship

Luke 15.1-10

Introduction

Earlier this year I typed in my surname and Ireland into Google and found an article in the *Irish Times*. Three brothers surnamed Dundon were being indicted in the Irish supreme court for running a range of illegal and very violent activities from their gaol cells. They were already incarcerated but enjoying a boom in business using surrogates. They were obviously great delegators.

That is what today's story is about: you cannot choose your family but you can choose your friends. And according to his broader Judean family of Israel Jesus makes some very bad choices.

Jesus and his terrible table manners 1-3

Jesus is eating again this time with tax collectors and sinners, the reprobates of ancient Palestine (1-2). I have to say that it is very hard to recreate the horror that this action of Jesus created for his opponents. Inviting known gang members or criminals to your home for a meal might give something of the flavour.

The reaction of the Pharisees and scribes is not about taste; (they are not of my class or my education) but about shame and dishonouring

God, breaking the law and creating the conditions for evil to rule and thrive. The action seemed like the breakdown of everything.

In this Gospel toll collectors, although despised as a dishonest bunch, have responded well to Jesus.

And sinners are people who cannot be counted among the righteous and are therefore of low socio-religious status and were usually thought of as excluded or even damned. This designation of sinner is not about morality as a primary reference but about their relation to the legal requirements of God as proposed by the Pharisees. It was more a question of shame and honour, inclusion or exclusion in the household of God.

As part of their understanding who one eats with as well as what one eats are central to one's status in the Israel of God. Jesus' opponents hostility to him is regularly occasioned by his friends at table. Their complaint is summarised in 2b.

His action and teaching are a rejection of the values and norms of his Pharisaic peers and the social elites that supported them.

Then Jesus' choice of the despised shepherd and the woman as illustrations of God's actions is even more offensive

The shepherd image strikes at Jesus' tormentors and accusers (3-7). Jesus addresses his accusers as shepherds. "Which of you having a hundred sheep..." The shepherd was despised socially as his flocks

often wandered on to private property and ate their fill. Shepherds were unclean and they were a proscribed trade along with camel drivers, sailors, gamblers with dice, dyers and tax collectors, and therefore outside the law.

In fact they had acquired the reputation of shiftless, thieving, trespassing hirelings.

Yet the Bible authors' image of the shepherd was very different. God works like a shepherd just as the prophets and psalmists say; Isaiah 40.11, Psalm 23, 38.9, 80.1, 100.3, Jeremiah 31.10, Ezekiel 34.11-22. God searches out the lost like a shepherd and takes great delight in their return

Moses is a great shepherd and the kings are God's shepherds on the model of David and are held accountable for their shepherding

To suggest in this first parable that Pharisees are shepherds is highly confronting socially but theologically devastating. Jesus says they are not behaving like God, they are not like Moses or David. Nor do they want to be. They are not rejoicing over God's sheep that once were lost but now are found. They are not going to go searching for them either. All of this and more is very offensive.

The parable of the lost coin uses a woman's loss of her coin, possibly from a necklace(8-10) as his centrepiece. The choice of the woman as a suitable illustration to make a highly significant point about the

nature of God is a careful moral decision that Jesus makes. I have given illustrations of the inferiority of woman as understood in the ancient world and I won't illustrate that further.

She knows that the coin is in the house because, true the time, she does not leave it. The movement of peasant women in the ancient was limited; If she keeps sweeping she will find what she has lost. And find it she must because of the scarcity of money; such a rare commodity in a village or peasant home is a great and sad loss indeed.

Four theological themes

Within these sharp loaded little stories we find a cluster of four themes centering on the word joy. This is a wonderful Christian word not much associated with Christian faith in the modern world.

It is always worthwhile reflecting on how many references there are in the Old and New Testaments from the Psalms to Paul, to delight, joy, bliss, exultation, merry making and rejoicing.

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.” Ps 100.1

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again will I say, Rejoice.”

Philippians 4.4

GK Chesterton once said that, “A person is fully human when joy is the fundamental thing in him...” And again, “Joy is the uproarious labour by which all things live”

In a world that seeks for joy but confuses it with pleasure joy is hard to define. I will try by sharing how I saw something that some of you might have also.

It was a story on Foreign Correspondent. The Chinese government has strict rules about rural/peasant people moving to the cities to find work. One rule is that they cannot bring children unless they are prepared to foot the bills for education, health and other needs and services. So many children are left in villages with schools and grandparents.

The reporter told the story of one young lad who lived at a school and with his grandparents. He was alert and well-dressed He put on a brave face when the reporter questioned him about his situation and showed understanding of his mother’s and father’s need to work in the cities and not come home to see him. Quiet tears streamed down his face when he was asked if he missed them.

Then he received a message that his mother was coming home to see him. His whole demeanour lit up. And he waited with patience until he could see his mother walking up the road with a large

suitcase. She had left the bus miles before and had walked into the village in the hills. He beamed.

Then, before she left to return to work in the city, his mother made the decision that she would return at the end of the school year and take him to live with her. She would pay all the costs the Chinese government imposed.

The lad almost burst. Everything had changed; his mother's promise changed his world. He had good news. Things would be different because his mother was going to do something to make it different.

It would cost his mother dearly. But it meant that he was being welcomed back into his family. His happiness was not wishful thinking. He had to wait for a little while but the good news of his mother's action would sustain him.

In these two little stories Jesus brings together joy, good news and a new future. And he uses four closely woven pictures.

Joy in restoration to community

The finding of the sheep and the coin both take place in the community. The restoration is a community welcome. The beautiful image of welcome and hospitality in community strikes us as we read these little stories.

And welcome is a gospel word, a gospel value, of great significance. Thus Jesus defends his welcome and hosting of those most unwelcome to his opponents and arbiters of taste, ethics and manners. The Christian life and Christian worship is to share in the joy God expresses in the conversion of sinners.

Joy in the burden of that restoration

But there is another joy and that is often overlooked here; the joyful acceptance of the price paid, the cost imposed on searching for the lost item. The accepting of the burden for the search the shepherd accepts with joy as does the woman.

The unconditional grace that seeks the lost

The two parables make a similar point: the endless trouble people will go to to recover valuable lost property and their deep satisfaction when they succeed. Toll collectors and sinners really do belong to God and God wants them back and will take the trouble to win them back to himself.

This is the grace that underlies all the work of Jesus and the kingdom.

And the seeking shepherd reminds us that if God behaves this way shepherds must as well. The Christian community exists by grace and grace must be driving force.

A new understanding of repentance

In Jesus' world repentance was precondition of grace. With repentance you brought in the kingdom. Repentance for Jesus as these parables clearly show is a response to grace. Grace has come seeking. Grace has come knocking. I have been found. The kingdom is already here.

Notice the powerful sense of celebration that is characteristic of the character of God. God celebrates with great joy over one person who takes up God's agenda of the kingdom and lives by it.

God has no interest in the separation and self-justification, exclusion and judgement that characterises much religious life. Jesus is only interested in the question what kind of people shall we be in the light of the coming kingdom.

He has no interest in 'who-is-in' and 'who-is-out', 'who is high' or 'who is low', 'who are people considered shameful' or 'who are considered worthy of honour'.

He only asks, "Have we been found?" "Has grace found us?"

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a question. The real challenge for us in our world is; what would we have to do, in the public world, if we were

to make people ask the questions to which these parables are the answer?

What would we have to do that would make people ask, “Why are you doing something like that?” And give us the chance to tell stories about something that was lost?

We invite people to come and see. Come and see what?