Week 4

Prepare yourself by reading Luke 15.1-32

Reflections on the Gospel reading

Chapter 15 contains three stories about losing and finding. They are unique to Luke. Whereas Matthew Mark and Luke often tell the same story of Jesus seeking the lost in their own way, these three stories are found only in Luke. The chapter begins with the story of the lost sheep and the love and diligence of the shepherd who goes off in search of it. Then comes the story of the woman who lost a coin and sweeps the house out until it is found. Finally, we have the biggest and most detailed of the stories – the lost son.

The wonderful story of the prodigal son is – along with Luke’s parables of the good Samaritan and the good shepherd – perhaps the most well-known of the parables of Jesus. The experience of the young man and his father is a timeless story that people of every time and culture seem able to relate to.

We know that the focus of the story has long been the young son who left home, however the story is told to emphasise the gracious love of the father in the story. Indeed, in all three of Luke’s lost-stories the focus is placed upon both the lost one and the finder. Simply put, the lost sheep, coin, and son represent us, corporately and individually. The one who searches, and finds is God. Our human nature is that we easily go astray and God’s nature is that God does not give up on us.

The son and father story however is significantly different from the other two in that the father does not go searching for his son to bring him home. The lost son chose to leave the safety of the group and home. He also decided to find his own way home and choose to become part of the family again. Unlike the shepherd and the coin-owner, the father does not go hunting for his son but spends his days watching, yearning for his return.

What drove the young man to want to leave home? There is no clue in the story. Perhaps he was bored with life at home and the mundane little varying round of work. It could be that he was tired of being younger son, and living in the shadow of his older brother. Perhaps he felt that he was destined for more important things than the endless round of menial farm tasks. ‘Menial’ is an interesting word, derived from the Greek ‘meno’, meaning ‘I remain’. Menial tasks on a farm are everyday things like feeding animals, mucking out stables, carting water and this is everyday life for the one who remains on the farm. Remaining was the last thing on the young man’s mind. He left to chase the more important tasks of the wider world that would bring him the recognition and reward he deserved.

We are however left with no doubt about his motivation in returning home. Disillusioned with life in the wider world, where people saw him as something to be consumed or someone to be used soon brought him to his senses. He headed home.

The focus upon the father at home gives a clear picture of his love for the young man. In his joy at seeing the son return he ran to meet him. In describing the father’s response, the original Greek reveals so much more than the modern English translations. English translations of the Greek *splagchnizomai* record that he felt compassion for him but this doesn’t reveal the depth of the emotion – the Greek word means he had a gut reaction, he was shocked and horrified, angry at seeing his son in this state. He had returned starving, broken, destitute. English translations then say that “he embraced him” or “he put his arms around him” but the Greek literally describes the father as being so overcome with emotion – a mix of joy, relief, horror and anger – that he ‘collapsed on his son’s neck’. This describes God’s response to everyone who comes home through Jesus.

Think about – the security of home and family life

Everyday life at home might have seemed boring for much of the time, an endless round of dull predictable work, but as the young man finally realised, it’s a context where you are known, fed, accepted, safe . . . and loved.

We know that for many people, life in their present moments and everyday contexts is often a challenge. There are many reasons why this is the case. Young people – like the young man in the Gospel story – often regard their families and home towns as small, boring and limiting in comparison to the perceived excitement of other places. City life seems to attract young people with a sophisticated fast pace of life, clubs, music, noise, lights and people with flashy expensive clothes and cars providing evidence of success. There is so much promise held out to them. Home town life can be seen in comparison as naive, ordinary, plain.

Many people are content to spend their present moment lives anywhere where they feel safe and secure. Sadly, the everyday context for too many people is one of homelessness, rent-stress, un or under-employment. Many people feel threatened by peers or neighbours, unwelcome by the majority who live around them.

Think about – the struggle to keep grounded in our ordinary lives

Living in a present moment that varies little from day to day is always a challenge. People become easily bored when one day is barely distinguishable from another. Same faces, same routine, predictability. Scholars tell us that this was always a huge challenge for people living in monastic communities and indeed a word was coined to describe this experience in the very early centuries of the church. Monastic life was disciplined and grounded in the repetitive daily activities of the community – prayer, worship, study, work. The predictability of this daily life often led to a sense of boredom. A word was coined to describe the feeling of emotional flatness experienced by monks as the day wore on and they yearned for something different – *acedia.* Even something as ordinary as the arrival of lunchtime could lift their spirits and get them through their lack of energy and motivation. Acedia was a dangerous threat to monastic life in other ways as minds wandered to the outside world, leading monks to wonder what they were missing out on, what else they could be doing or achieving outside their limited predictable community life.

The American Kathleen Norris has written extensively about acedia and about the issue of coping positively with the ordinary hum-drum of everyone’s every-ay life at home, at work, where life can be repetitive and predictable. Norris also examines this issue using the term *‘quotidian’*, a very un-ordinary word to describe very ordinary everyday existence.

For the sake of our emotional well-being and to stay grounded in our daily faithful following of Jesus, we must develop strategies for seeing and meeting God in the ordinary things and moments. In the book The Quotidian Mysteries, Norris writes *“The fact that none of us can rise so far in status as to remove ourselves from the daily, bodily nature of life on this earth is not usually considered a cause for celebration, but rather the opposite” (p6).*The fact that God created the universe and then entered and remained in our everyday ordinariness in the person of the creative word Jesus, should be hugely encouraging. If this is the case, then nothing in life is ordinary but everything and everyone reflects something of the divine.

Jesus injected himself permanently into the daily life of the Church in the pledge of his ongoing presence in the sacraments. In the ordinary meal-gathering of Christians that we know as holy communion, the risen Christ is present in bread and wine, the ordinary product of the earth and people labouring together. Jesus is present in the whole gathering of his people to remember and the share the resurrection meal. Norris writes that her first experience of Catholic worship was to attend a communion service where the ordinary event of sharing a meal with God and others ended with the fact that, “*after all the dress-up and formalities of the wedding mass, homage was being paid to the lowly truth that we human beings must wash the dishes after we eat and drink. I found it enormously comforting to see the priest as a kind of daft housewife, overdressed for the kitchen in bulky robes puttering about the altar washing up after having served so great a meal to so many people.” (The Quotidian Mysteries p3).*

Think about - lost, found and being safe

Through many years of ministry, I’ve ministered to more and more people living in old age with the added burden of dementia. These people have somehow become lost, wandered from their ‘right’ mind. They have become locked in a situation where nothing is familiar, little makes sense. For some it’s a happy or uninhibited place; for too many, a frightening unfamiliar context bereft of happiness and meaning. Aged care places usually do their best to help make their present moments and living context meaningful and familiar for residents with dementia. At times however, more is needed.

One day I was contacted by the staff of a facility and asked to visit a dear parishioner who had slipped quickly into a state of dementia and who was in a state of constant anxiety. This woman had lived her whole life in a small harbourside suburb and the local parish was the focus of her worship, service and fellowship. Her living context had been entirely God-focussed. Everything about church gave meaning and purpose to her life. Now however no amount of talking, reassuring or prayer made a difference to the woman’s dislocated present moment and she sat crying and shaking hour after hour. I told the staff that I would give the woman holy communion.

As I set up the little table in her room with chalice and paten, bread and wine, little cross and candles, Bible and prayer book she quickly calmed down and sat peacefully. For the first time in weeks she spoke and smiled and had a long chat with the me and the director of nursing (DON). When it came time for communion she put her prayer book aside and gently prayed the service. She happily read the Gospel reading. The DON wanted to extend the moment of the woman’s reclaimed safe place and asked that morning tea be brought to her room. We enjoyed a long chat and celebrated her return. Sadly, when the communion kit was packed up and we left the room she again began to cry and shake. We discussed this and devised a strategy for making her safe and as fulfilled as was possible in her current situation. Every morning the staff took her to the chapel and sat her in front of the altar. The lady sat happily and in peace with prayer book and Bible in hand and spent many hours in prayer and reading the scriptures. In the same way that the lost sheep had been found and the young man had turned toward home, this lady had found her safe place with God, and her present moments again made sense to her.