

Lost and found...
Pentecost 14, 11 September 2022
Jeremiah 4: 11 -28
Luke 15: 1-10
Geoff King

'Don't worry, it'll turn up.'

How many of us have ever said those words to someone who's just told us that they've lost something?

How many of us have ever lost something and had some well-meaning person say those words to us?

And if we've ever had those words said to us, how helpful did we find them?

I guess our answer to that question will depend on whether we belong to what I'm going to call personality type A or personality type B.

Based purely on my own experience and observation of the world over the last five and a half decades, I've come to the conclusion that the world contains basically two types of people:

Those who are quite content to wait patiently until it turns up whenever they lose something - type A.

And those who turn their immediate environment upside in an exhaustive and often exhausting search whenever they happen to lose something - type B.

I've also noticed that for reasons which might point to the existence of a cosmic sense of humour at the heart of the universe, type A people often seem to find themselves in long term relationships with people from type B.

In case you're wondering, I am most definitely a type B personality, whilst my wife has been a type A for as long as I have known her, which is nearly 40 years.

For about 15 of those years I was working in parish ministry, which meant that Gillian got to hear me working my way through the three yearly cycle of revised common lectionary readings roughly five times. Strangely, as far as I can tell from my records, this is the first time I've ever written and preached a sermon on the texts we've heard this morning - so you're definitely not getting a 'recycled' message delivered to you today!

Also in case you're wondering, even though my wife is not in the congregation this morning, I am neither brave nor foolish enough to preach a sermon claiming that type B is in any way 'superior' or more 'godly' than type A - although it's tempting to leap to that conclusion based on a superficial reading of today's text from the Gospel of Luke.

On the surface, the message of the verses we've heard appears to be pretty simple. Jesus, who is being criticised by the leaders of the religious establishment for socialising with 'tax collectors and sinners' puts the self-proclaimed righteous insiders in their place by telling a couple of challenging stories about the so-called 'lost' outsiders are sought out and valued by God. These stories are followed by probably the best-known biblical story about God actively seeking out the so-called lost, namely the parable of the prodigal son, but that's next Sunday's lectionary reading, so let's focus on Jesus' opening remarks on lostness and foundness in what we heard today.

The first of the stories we heard is possibly a bit challenging for us for a very practical reason: In this country it is still I suspect commonplace to regard sheep as a commodity. Whilst there are now 'only' 26 million of them (compared with more than 4 times that many in the 1980s), sheep in Aotearoa NZ still outnumber humans by a factor of roughly five to one. Nevertheless, having grown up in rural Hawke's Bay, spending many school holidays in the countryside with farming relatives, I have witnessed the lengths to which humans will go to protect and care for animals, so the parable of the lost sheep has always struck a special chord with me.

And because type B personalities are in the majority in my family of origin, I've never struggled to relate to the parable of the lost coin either. When I learned that in first century Palestine it was common practice for women to wear a head-dress made of coins comprising their dowry, the parable made even more sense to me. If I had lost one tenth of the wealth I hoped would see me through to old age, I would also be turning

the place upside down until I found it. I suspect that most people would - regardless of whether they're personality type A or type B. And that I think is part of the enduring power and relevance of this parable. Even if we (thankfully) no longer live in a culture that commodifies women by expecting them to bring money or property into a marriage, we can all relate to the pain or the fear of losing something or someone of value, because all of us have experienced a loss of some kind at some point in our lives.

Whilst it can be incredibly painful to lose to lose an object that holds material or sentimental value, it's another thing entirely to lose a person, or even a personally held conviction about how things are or are meant to be. That's what makes things like sudden deaths, natural disasters, pandemics and political upheavals so challenging; they confront us with the unavoidable fact that even though we are living in the most technologically advanced human society ever, we are still affected by forces and therefore afflicted by fears which are entirely beyond our control.

I suppose we could do what the writer of our first reading did, and regard these afflictions as signs of God's judgement, but I suspect - in fact I more than suspect that Jesus would see that as far too simplistic. Let's remember that a couple of chapters before today's Gospel reading Jesus states emphatically that 18 people who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them were no worse 'sinners' than their fellow citizens. And let's also remember that Jesus used this and another tragic incident of bloodshed and suffering to challenge his listeners to repent - to turn their lives around and open up to God. Let's notice also that amidst all the doom, gloom and bleakness of our first reading from the book of Jeremiah, who is with good reason known as the weeping prophet, there is a phrase which echoes down through the ages with haunting simplicity: *'Yet I will not make a full end.'*

Like the rainbow in the heavens as a sign of God's promise to Noah and his descendants, these words of Jeremiah contain something that any lost soul needs, and that something is hope.

I could be wrong, but I'm of the opinion that hope is what keeps type B people looking for things long after logic tells them they should stop looking. It's also probably what keeps type B and type A people together in long term relationships - the hope that one day, one or the other (or maybe both of them) might change... Hope is what causes people who've become lost to stop, retrace their steps, consult a map, gps or even an old-school compass, and then resume their journey.

And hope is also what enables people who've made a wrong turn to repent - turn around - and head back the right way.

So what is the right way, and how do people get back on it?

For two thousand years or so, Christians have found the right way of living in what the Gospels have to tell us of the teachings of Jesus, the heart of which he famously summarised as loving the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind, and loving our neighbours as we love ourselves. Jesus also said something really provocative about loving our enemies, but that particular teaching hasn't proved to be quite so popular - although I can't help thinking that working out what it means is probably more important than ever as we gather on the 21st anniversary of the terror attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, with the war in the Ukraine about to enter its 200th day, and countless conflicts of various kinds going on all over the globe.

Add things like the depletion of fossil fuels, growing water shortages and climate change to the mix and we can't avoid the fact that the world we inhabit is not in great shape. With 20 % of the world's population consuming more than 80 % of the world's resources and the richest 1 % owning half the world's wealth, I imagine Jesus would say the human race has lost its way.

And then I imagine he would challenge us to get back on track by realigning our lives to God's values of food for the hungry, water for the thirsty, and justice for the oppressed. I imagine he'd encourage us to draw hope and encouragement from the wisdom of those who've gone before us, people who had their own experiences of loss, pain, and perhaps even despair and confusion, and who nevertheless found their own unique ways to make this world a better place.

Last Friday morning I was in an assembly with some 200 year 9 and 10 students at Burnside High School, which began with a minute's silence to acknowledge the death of Her Majesty the Queen. We then sang the National Anthem, and our Divisional Principal shared with the students one of her favourite quotes by Queen Elizabeth, which struck me as just the kind of wisdom that can help to get weary and discouraged people back on track and on their way: *'When life seems hard, the courageous do not lie down and accept defeat; instead, they are all the more determined to struggle for a better future.'* Queen Elizabeth also said 'it's worth remembering that it is often the small steps, not the giant leaps, that bring about the most lasting change.' It's been said that people who take small steps are less likely to get lost than those whose minds are set on leaping, and that brings me back to where we started, wondering about our experiences of lost and found.

Whatever we've been through in life, and regardless of what our personality type may be, my hope is that we will each have found something to nurture, challenge, and maybe even inspire us simply by being present here this morning. In the words of Colin Gibson's hymn that we sang earlier, I hope also that we can face the challenges of the weeks ahead trusting that nothing and no-one is lost on the breath of God; nothing is lost forever, God's word is love and that love remains holding the world forever. I hope we will continue to take small steps individually and as a community, placing one foot faithfully after the other, finding meaning and purpose amidst the journeys we are on as followers of Jesus Christ.

And on that note, let me leave you with the words of a poem by Joy Cowley. It's called 'The Centre of the Circle'¹ and it's about journeying, about finding and being found by the God who is love.

'When I began my journey, the road was quite narrow
 And fear lurked on either side.
 I shrank from people who walked paths so distant they seemed opposite to mine, and I even called them enemy.
 But love called me on and the beautiful road grew wider.
 Fear was still there but I could see over its fences,
 And people on other paths seemed nearer so that I could call to them and wish them well as they travelled.
 Still, love called my heart, and the beautiful road grew so wide that the boundaries of fear disappeared.
 I saw other paths so close to mine that I wondered how I ever could have viewed them as alien.
 Come, said love, dragging at my heart,
 And now the paths had no separation,
 And no horizons, only a brightness that transcends all ways and words.
 We did not need to name it, for in its light, we were all one..

¹ From *Psalms for the Road* by Joy Cowley, Catholic Supplies (NZ) Ltd, 2002.