

Address by Hannah Alderson for 11 September 2022 at St David's Church

Trinity 13 - Education Sunday - Values

Prayer

the place is unfamiliar
my face is bare
I've mislaid my glasses
I've looked in my glasses case
but they're not there
and I need my glasses
to find my glasses
but I'll be alright
I've got a spare pair

somewhere

I easily relate to this amusing poem by John Hegley. I seem to be constantly searching for my lost glasses. I'd need all my fingers and toes to count how many times I've left my glasses in church. Fortunately, with a little bit of help from my friends, I will almost always find them to my great relief and joy. My glasses are very valuable, very precious in helping me to get things done. I put it all down to old age. Mind you, I put a lot of things down to old age.

Chapter 15 is the "lost and found" section of St Luke's Gospel. Following the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin, we hear the parable of the prodigal son, a man who rather than losing something, lost his way. I remember many years ago as a young teacher losing my way. I was leading a group of children in years 5 and 6 at the Start Bay residential centre in Slapton. This particular morning I had planned an exciting walk with just 10 of the children and we got lost. This was before the days of risk assessment. Of course I didn't let it be known to the children that we were lost, despite going through some very demanding terrain. Was I relieved when I eventually realised where we were. My heart rejoiced.

The prodigal son, you will recall, lost his way in life, leaving home and frittering away all of his inheritance on foolish activities. When he eventually returned home, his

father killed the fatted calf and held a great party. Most of us lose our way in life in one way or another.....and hopefully we find it again. All our stories of lost and found share similar conclusions - relief, joy and celebration, because what was lost was greatly valued, so a successful search demands a party.

There are two different audiences for Jesus' parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Firstly there are the tax-collectors and sinners, who get close up to Jesus so they can hear clearly what he is saying. Meanwhile the Pharisees and the scribes, perhaps standing a little further away, were grumbling and complaining about how this fellow, Jesus, welcomes sinners and even wines and dines with them. The values of the Pharisees and Scribes however are not the values Jesus possesses. They believe that salvation lies only in knowing and following the rules and laws of the Jewish religion, by being regular attenders in the synagogue and faithful to God's commandments, which their forefather Moses brought down from Mount Sinai.

As important as it is to worship and follow God's commandments, Jesus knows that there are always times when we lose our way; when our minds wander from following him to the seductive ways of making money, increasing our possessions, seeking popularity or power and only thinking of ourselves. It is when we are lost in our worldly ways, or at a loss, or have suffered loss, that Jesus will be with us. This week we have all suffered the loss of the Queen of whom the Guardian newspaper said "she was woven into the cloth of our lives." It is a seismic event in our history, but we can thank God for her long and peaceful reign, for her exemplary faith and service, for her humility and grace. We can be assured that she will be welcomed in Heaven with the assuring words , "Well done thou good and faithful servant."

So when we are lost, or at a loss, or have suffered loss He will find us and bring us back. Back not to condemnation, but back to mercy and celebration. Just as there is great rejoicing in heaven as on earth when the lost sheep or coin is found, so there is over one who repents, one who is found in Jesus - and that could mean over you or me. The message is clear that everyone is welcome in God's kingdom. The church of Jesus Christ is totally inclusive. The ground is level at the foot of the cross.

Today is Education Sunday and it's a challenge to ask what we really value in our schools, colleges and universities. What do we actively seek for from our education

service? Is there anything which is lost that would be good to find again? Just as it is easy to fall into the trap of regarding value as wealth and capital, it is easy to fall into the trap of seeing education as individual examination success; as gaining more and more cultural capital, GCSEs, A levels and degrees. As important as these may be, at the centre of our education service lies the child, the student, the undergraduate. Perhaps we have lost somewhat the need to listen to those who are being educated, the need to invest highly in those with special educational needs or who come from highly disadvantaged homes. I don't wish to eulogise too much over the years before the 1988 Education Act with the introduction of the National Curriculum and children being tested from the age of four and School Inspectors searching for the "value-added factor", yet the "child-centred" progressive movement of the 60s, 70s and 80s had much to recommend it. When asked "What did you teach?", I always answer "children". As with the church, our education system should value all, should be totally inclusive of all children's needs and get the balance right between teaching for "good results" and teaching "children".

So what do these two parables tell us about the nature of our God, about the values Jesus expresses in them? That he is a seeking and a finding God, who continually looks to bring people back into his fold and also for new followers. He actively seeks restoration and gives us a mission, a sending and going out to find others who will turn to Christ. He is an all inclusive God, who may be angry at our selfishness in values, just as he was when the Israelites worshipped the golden calf, who may be exasperated by the fickleness of our natures when we become distracted by worldly temptations, but yet a God who is patient, forgiving and loving, continually searching for us.

The great news also is that our God is a celebratory God and he encourages us to party as well. I'm always up for a celebration. Just as the Father killed the fatted calf to give a great feast when his prodigal son returned home, he rejoiced with his neighbours when the sheep was found. And when the woman found her precious coin, there was joy in the presence of the angels of God, as well as with her neighbours. Heaven was in harmony. A clear example of God's kingdom coming here on earth. Malcolm Guite writes that this is:

“Good news to all who turn and try again
The meek rejoice and prodigals find pardon.”