**15th September 2019a**

**Luke 15.1-10**

It was beautiful and moving to be at the memory café on Thursday. To see the love and care for each other as carers and volunteers encouraged each other and people who had memory loss and dementia fe3lt included and loved. Dementia has been described as being lost. You lose your bearings, your orientation. Fr some that can bring agitation and anxiety. A reassuring voice and a welcoming presence can make all the difference.

These parables pf Jesus are about the lost. It’s a pejorative term. No one likes to be labelled ‘lost’. Everyone likes to think they know who they are and know what they are doing. The reality is that many people live quiet lives of despair – wondering what life is all about and trying to make sense of it all. I hope the Alpha Course will offer a friendly and welcoming space for people to explore those issues about meaning and purpose in life and especially a relationship with God our Creator. Because for me these parables are less about the lost and more about the risky love of the shepherd.

A Sunday school teacher decided to explore the theme of ‘The Good Shepherd’ during a family service. He asked the children to come out to the front, to imagine that they were sheep and that they were in danger from wolves and birds of prey. But they were not to worry because he was there to care for them and to protect them, sleeping across the gate of the sheep pen. Then he asked one little boy to run and hide somewhere in the church. He set out to look for the lost child and happily brought him back to others. ‘Well children,’ he asked expectantly, ‘have I been a good shepherd?’ The children, who had completely got ‘into role’, answered unanimously, ‘No! You were lousy – you forgot all about us and the wolves could have eaten us up!’ some of the little ones looked frightened. The teacher was humbled and reflected that it might have been unwise to combine two different shepherd stories into one piece of drama.

The parable is not a homely illustration. Yes Jesus parables are drawn from everyday life but they often contradict it. ‘Which of you would leave 99 sheep in the wilderness and go after the lost one until you found it? Nobody would do that! The lost one is probably dead anyway. And you’d stand the risk of losing more. Why not just write the lost off? They are not worth the effort and risk? And as for celebrating if you did something this foolhardy you would hardly proclaim it to the world: ‘Look I’m a careless shepherd I lose sheep and put all the others at risk in going to look for it.’

Part of the problem is that we think that parables teach something: like a preacher illustrating a point. But parables don’t teach something; they challenge. They provoke us into thinking, ‘’Is that right?’ Is that how things are? Is that fair?

Jesus is troubling; he brings disturbance. Everywhere he went he caused commotion. In some places there was joy – people got healed, lives were changed; in others there was argument and debate, people affected and changed.

The religious leaders were accusing Jesus of not acting like a holy man because he welcomed the wrong people. Jesus responded by telling stories full of wrong endings. They are not like fairy stories in which the good get rewarded and the bad punished, where a sense of natural justice is endorsed. Such stories support the status quo, the dominant assumptions and values of society. That is why they are told to children at bedtime; they lived happily ever after’ its a reassuring invitation to sleep. But Jesus parables were often a wake-up call- they challenge the status quo, just as by his behaviour Jesus was challenging the dominant assumptions and values of his society.

The parables of Jesus are marked by incongruity (wrong endings) paradox (apparent contradictions) and ambiguity (more than one interpretation may suggest itself to the hearer). Paradox and incongruity are powerful ways to challenge our assumptions about ourselves and the way the world is.

The developmental psychologist Jean Piaget argued that it is through challenge to existing mental maps or schemas posed by real world incongruities that cognitive abilities advance in Children. In other words, in plain English, children grow when they have an experience that makes them question, or challenges their way of understanding the world. Jesus use of paradox seems to have been unique amongst religious teachers of his time. His agenda was to question, challenge and thereby transform.

Paradox can also express mystery. The presence of God cannot be captured in simple propositional language or even in pictures. The paradox of the parables tries to hold in tension the fact that God has drawn close to us and entered the world of nature and relationships, but remains profoundly mysterious. When we are at our limits, weary, suffering, deeply confused, that we become especially aware of the presence of God. Psychologists talk of boundary situations where people are confronted with the inexplicable and irresolvable limits of the world... The parables of Jesus push us into those boundary situations if we let them.

So how does Jesus capacity to shock, to unsettle, and to challenge what we think we know come out in these two parables:

Let me tell what God is really like! This is what Jesus is claiming to be doing in this parable of the lost sheep. This is an audacious claim. The context is grumbling about Jesus actions in welcoming tax collectors and sinners but he responds by telling a parable about how God behaves.

Most people would have thought the parable was about Jesus seeking out the lost. Yet the image of sheep and shepherd was already well known in Judaism – Ezekiel 34 has God as a shepherd searching for the sheep. What at first seems to be a defence of Jesus actions on deeper consideration turns out to be a provocative teaching about what God is really like. The ambiguity of a parable.

Jesus implies that God is searching for the lost like a shepherd searching for the sheep. We can miss the force of this image. The man in the story is the owner of a very large flock of sheep. He is by implication, a rich and powerful man. He would have had shepherds to look after his flock for him. But he does not order his minions to find his lost sheep. He decides to look for the sheep himself. He isn’t a shepherd – he chooses to become a shepherd. He, a rich man, chooses to take on one of the most menial and despised jobs in Jewish society. He, a powerful man, engages in an activity that by its nature throws up his human weakness and limitation. For it is not that the all-knowing owner knows where to find the sheep and sets out to collect it. The sheep is lost and it has to be searched for. The image is of God himself having to work, to search out, unsure of success; enduring heat, danger, discomfort. The man seeks after his sheep ‘until he has found it’. This is open ended; it is fundamentally not under his control.

We often think about people finding their way back to God. Like Little Bo Beep who lost her sheep, left to their own devices they will find their way home. These two parables are from God’s perspective, a God who is seeking the lost.

Jesus is talking about God in terms of action and expression - of searching behaviour and of joyful celebration. In recent years neuroscientists have identified two distinct human brain-behaviour systems that underpin different types of searching.

One is characterized by curiosity, the desire to explore, to, play with ideas, to experience new things. This type of searching is pleasurable.

The second sort arises from enforced separation from a companion (human or animal). This sort of seeking is associated with distress and sadness, only removed by reunion with the lost companion.

We can think of the searching that goes on for missing children. The searching for a lost pet. The searching in the parable is the latter variety – no pleasure or curiosity but the intense joy on being reunited with the sheep. Jesus implies that God experiences separation distress (an emotion).

It’s painful to let your child go to school for the first time – your teenager to wander off to university. There is great joy when the sheep is found when the child comes back, the teenager arrives home with their washing and hoping for a good meal!

The man’s decision to go after the sheep is not rational, given that it could put so many other sheep at risk. It is not based on a cost-benefit analysis. It is an act of the heart. He feels for the sheep. The losing of the sheep affects him personally. He searches for the sheep primarily to meet his own needs, for his own name’s sake. although it is also in the sheep’s best interests.

Talking about God in such emotional terms challenges many conventional ways of thinking about the divine.

The parable is about risk. The risk this man is prepared to accept in order to save the lost sheep. Indeed as he sets out to search he does not know whether he will find the sheep or not. He undergoes the risk for the chance of finding the sheep.

The Pharisees were criticizing Jesus. His welcome of sinners was risky and polluting the purity of the Jewish people and their identity. Holiness all too easily becomes a matter of separation from impurity – avoid pollution, avoid sin. The Pharisees response to losing sheep would be to build the fences higher to protect themselves. This is a response dominated by fear. The good of the many is more important than the possible salvation of the few. Like the children in the story I began with, Jesus was endangering the good, chasing after the lost sheep and leaving the 99 in peril.

Yet Jesus challenges the Pharisees to see the situation from God’s perspective – who is overwhelmed by love and compassion and ongoing concern for lost individuals.

In the next parable Jesus compares God with a woman. Jesus was often doing this – gender complementarity. Balancing stories about men and women. In Jesus day men could move freely between homes and the outside world but respectable women stayed at home. In both these parables the man and woman are searching to the furthest extent of their worlds and the woman’s world is small. But Jesus is raising up and honouring the apparently humdrum everyday activities of women by saying what you are doing is like the activity of God.

In the parable of the lost coin you have no one to blame. You could partly blame the stupid sheep for wandering off. But who can you blame when a coin is lost? The focus is purely on the woman, purely on God. Jesus is challenging his hearer to focus on what is at the heart of the situation. - The simple fact that people are lost and that God is seeking to save /find them. The reason they became lost is of little consequence; what is important is the fact that they are lost. It’s as if God is saying to a classroom of arguing children, ‘I don’t care who started it’.

Once again the finding benefited the finder. It is God not the sinner who throws the party. Once again we are reminded of the experience of parents searching for a lost child. The anxiety and the joy of finding lies mainly with the parents. God is more pleased when we are saved than we are ourselves.

These parables are so familiar, and yet they are truly revolutionary. Implicitly they contain claims about Jesus and his mission, for the way God behaves and thinks is presented as a defence of Jesus’ actions. More dramatically they contain surprising teaching about the nature of God in his interaction with human beings. We hear God described in terms that suggest weakness and vulnerability, reckless risk taking, likened to human beings, male and female, who seem more emotional than cerebral in character.

Jesus is talking about those who are lost morally and spiritually, either through their own bad decisions, or through the socially exclusive practices of the culture they inhabit, or through a lethal combination of both.

There are times in out lives when many of us feel truly lost. Lost because we have been overcome with despair. Lost because of broken relationships. Lost because we have got stuck in negative cycles that we can do nothing to change. Lost because we have done something so bad that if people only knew what we were really like they would reject and abandon us.

This parable tells us that being lost is part of the human condition but presents us a God who longs to find us, and who is prepared to risk everything to take us in his arms and carry us home.