

## Luke 15 (Lost Sheep and the Death of Queen Elizabeth II)

Where do we turn at a time such as this? The death of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, comes at a time when our nation faces hard economic challenges and a cost-of-living crisis, a new Prime Minister and political upheaval, questions about the values that underpin our society, as well as how we adjust to our new relationship with Europe and the wider world, not to mention coping with all of this as we emerge from a global pandemic. It is precisely at this moment that many would turn to the Queen as the calming and constant presence that has characterised her rule for over 70 years.

So, in her death it is not surprising that we, as a nation, might feel a bit lost. Who are we? Where are we going? Will it all be ok?

Our gospel reading speaks of being lost. It speaks of the sheep that wanders off, away from the fold. Perhaps it was too busy and preoccupied with eating grass—its head down, never stopping to look up and reorient itself once in a while.

But thankfully, it belongs to a good shepherd, who is willing to risk everything to come and find it, to seek it out and bring it home.

Jesus tells us God is like this shepherd. That no matter how far we might stray, we can never place ourselves outside the bounds of his searching love. We are never too lost to be brought home again.

Jesus tells this story in the context of being accused of hanging out with the wrong sort of people; tax collectors, sinners, the underclass of society. But Jesus responds to this rebuke by telling them that he has come for those who are *lost*. Those who know they are in need. Indeed, those who consider themselves among God's inner-circle, "a righteous person in no need of repentance" are perhaps even more lost, because they have not yet realised it— their heads are still down, chewing grass.

To be found involves turning, a word we know as "repentance." This is of course a very heavily loaded word, but repentance (in the Greek *metanoia*) simply means to "turn around," to "think again." Repentance is about recognising that we need to change direction, to reorient ourselves from a path which leads away from what we were made for.

At home we have to be very careful now whenever we open the door, because Jos will immediately head straight out and start running in the direction of the park or playground, whilst I'm still putting my shoes on! Once we are in the park, he will literally just keep chasing a pigeon, a ball, or almost anything, head down, totally oblivious to his own safety or any idea of where he is.

It is only when he stops, looks up, and turns around that he suddenly becomes aware that he has no idea where he is and has no idea of how to get back home! I'm not that cruel, however, and always follow him and stay close enough so that he sees me before the utter panic sets in. But it is only when he stops and turns around, that he realises he is lost and needs guidance and reassurance.

So too, repentance is about recognising our need to turn away from a self-obsessive path, to recognise that we too need guidance, and our need to know we are not alone. This is what it means to turn to Christ.

In repentance we turn to Jesus, who is both Shepherd and Lamb of God. We turn to our God who promises to lead us through the darkest valleys because he has walked its paths and goes before us to prepare a place in his eternal home.

Sometimes this "turning" might be more dramatic, a sharp turn when we suddenly become aware of how lost we are. At other times, it's a moment of simply stopping, lifting our heads up, and recalibrating where we are going. A daily activity that we call prayer.

But in this re-orientation, in our willingness to be gathered up and carried when we do not know the way, we are told all of heaven rejoices, the eternal landscape shifts, with a heavenly fanfare that puts even the Jubilee celebrations in perspective.

Indeed, I always found it very inspirational whenever I heard the Queen speak of her faith. Her simple trust in Jesus Christ. Even with her lofty earthly power and status, she held this eternal perspective and counted herself a follower of this Nazarene peasant. She knew her own need to turn daily to Christ, perhaps even moreso because of her responsibility and privilege, she knew her need to be refreshed and guided by the Great Shepherd of the sheep. She counted herself as a member of a greater Kingdom, rendering herself subject to the highest Majesty.

Despite her power, she knew her need, vulnerability, and frailty. A frailty made manifest in her death, a frailty and vulnerability we all share and shall all face. So, we pray that she may come to know and rest in the fullness of Christ's risen life, gathered into his eternal home.

And so, for us, regardless of how lost we might feel as a society or as individuals, let us also turn again, in simple trust, to our Great Shepherd, the Lord Almighty, Jesus Christ, and in turning to him, may we find ourselves already found, loved, and brought home.

Amen.