

One of the repeated comments made by those who, however fleetingly, met the late Queen in person has been that they were struck by her total attention, her focus being on them, they felt listened to, heard, received, valued. An impression, an experience that remained with people their whole life long.

In a real sense we pick up that feeling of total focus, with all its surprise and shock, in today's epistle.

Paul, or more likely, someone attributing their writing to Paul, expresses astonishment that God should focus upon someone like him- after all he had been a doubter, an active worker against people of the way, had sought to undermine and destabilise them. He certainly doesn't believe he

deserves the role carved out for him, the destiny he is required to fulfil. But rather, like those who received the late Queen's warmth and smile and attention, Paul feels bamboozled, humbled. Almost as if Paul wonders what on earth God is doing.

So too with Moses, alarmed and surprised to have been chosen to fulfil a role of leadership- his complex relationship with God, with peaks and troughs, nevertheless he perceives that God's focus is on him absolutely- so we have this extraordinary story in which Moses, rather in the style of a royal walkabout, has a chat with God and is successful in getting God to change his mind- from the divine anger in desiring to destroy the disobedient, grumbling people to OK, Moses, I've thought again and I'll bless them and make them fruitful.

In both these cases a change, a turning comes about in the natural order of things, the state we're in; the human condition doesn't need to have the final word- and something new, something quite revolutionary is introduced. From grumbling Israelites in the wilderness to grumbling Pharisees we move into these stories of lost and found.

Luke actually has three of them one after the other in this chapter 15- the Lost sheep, the Lost coin and, the Lost Son- which, in English we have subtly changed by calling him The Prodigal Son. But all three hang together- even if the lectionary compilers deign to give us only the first two of them today.

In these little cameos, there's a degree of ridiculousness, rather like camels and eyes of

needles, or the ludicrous top vintage wine lake at the wedding in Cana, the two stories we hear are equally inflated. Even an experienced shepherd will lose a lamb every now and then, Why would a decent shepherd put 99 sheep at risk to find one? The margin of loss is just too great. Why would a woman waste her time and energy searching for one lost coin when she has another nine to hand? And for each of these, after all that effort, why bust it all by barbequed chops or spending your new found coin on the booze for the party with the neighbours. It just doesn't make sense. No, it doesn't for us, who live with margins of loss, or error or acceptable failure in every part of our lives. But that is not Luke's point- or rather, it's not how Luke understands God. Yes, agreed, the shepherd

and the sweeping woman are not acting rationally. We are, much rather, to read and hear these stories, to question their values, their sense so that in turn, these stories might end up questioning our own stories and values. Wrestling with these stories of vast endeavour and generosity, celebration, joy out of hopelessness, will in due course question our values and- turn them upside down. The whole point is that there is no accommodating loss, no acceptable falling short in God's economy. God does not do natural wastage. No one is dispensable. These stories, like the Lost or Prodigal Son, shout out God's delight in finding the lost and forgotten, the overlooked and undervalued.

St Ignatius of Loyola, in the 16thC, encouraged those reading the scriptures and walking in the way of Jesus Christ to imagine themselves into the stories Jesus tells. There's been something of a revival in this Ignatian spirituality recently, in slowing down, mindfulness, bringing not just rational thought but also emotional engagement to the biblical text, into letting our imaginations wander and imagining ourselves into the scriptures. Who and how would you be in these stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin? What would it feel like to be found, or to be the finder- the shepherd, the woman, what might your reaction be to an invitation to a party- a celebration of something seemingly insignificant, lost and found.

For the clear implication of these stories where no loss, no natural wastage is tolerated, is that God is like the shepherd or the woman, extravagantly rejoicing in total commitment to us, who have settled for significantly less in our relationships.

‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners’- is the churchy shorthand for this. But translated means God doesn’t give up on anyone...and if so, then neither can we. No one is dispensable. A truly Christian insight we find perhaps, reflected in the life of our late Queen- whose commitment to total loyalty, to a whole life of service, a capacity to listen, to focus and embrace those she met is also for us not only to cherish, but to live out.

May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

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