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³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ 'Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep." ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.

⁸ 'Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin." ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

So, what do we have in these verses? Two stories with a single theme: something is lost, a search is made and the thing is found. And the finding is a cause for joy. It's obvious isn't it: we're lost, Jesus is searching for us and when he finds us, he's very happy. So come and be found. There you are, sermon all wrapped up in less than two minutes and a new record set for the shortest preach ever at Trinity Church!

The problem with all that of course, is that it's hardly scratching the surface. Jesus' stories have far more depth, far greater meaning than a two-minute overview could possibly provide. For a start, if the two stories are the same, why did Jesus bother with the second one, surely the 'Parable of the Lost Sheep' would be enough to make the point? Added to that, these stories are not two of two, but two of three. The rest, the bulk, of Luke chapter 15 is taken up with the 'Parable of the Lost Son', the 'prodigal' as it's often known; the passage that we'll be looking at next Sunday. Each story has it's distinctives as well as it's similarities. Different things are 'lost'; a sheep, a coin, a son. And different characters suffer that loss; a shepherd (or at least a sheep-owner, Jesus never actually uses the term 'shepherd' here), a woman and a father. The grouping of the three stories together in a single chapter, is not just for the sake of reinforcement, they complement each other. Take any one story on its own and it's quite possible to miss the overall purpose of the three. If you consider only the parable of the prodigal son, for example, it's quite easy to come away with the idea that all that's needed in order to be 'found' by God is a willingness to say 'sorry'. (Radio 4's 'Thought for the Day' on July 7th)

Whether Jesus told these stories one after the other, or whether Luke chose to edit his material in this way, God has put them together for a reason, to expand our vision and deepen our appreciation of what it means to be lost and found. So, let's look wider and dig deeper as we consider the first two components of this trinity of tales, bearing in mind their context, their core characters, and the whys and wherefores that they point us to.

1 The Context

The opening verses tell us who Jesus was talking to. "*¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.'*

³ Then Jesus told them this parable."

Jesus had been speaking about the cost of being his disciple, what it meant to follow him. One group that was particularly drawn by his teaching are the people described as 'tax collectors and sinners'. In polite Jewish society tax collectors were regarded as traitors, they worked for the hated Roman oppressors and in the process lined their own pockets as well. 'Sinners' were those generally regarded as irreligious or immoral, often living outside the compass of Jewish religion. They had come to hear him. The other group that was present, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, had come to grumble, criticise and condemn. So, there were two particular groups within the general audience of those that were listening to Jesus, and in these three tales he has something to say to each group; using ordinary, everyday situations to reveal a God who takes great joy and goes to extraordinary lengths to seek and save lost sinners, while at the same time warning of the danger of missing out on that joy by being cold and critical. So, tale number one, 'the lost sheep; or perhaps better 'the good shepherd'.

2. The Good Shepherd (v 4-7)

I wonder if any of you have seen the film 'The Sheep Detectives'. It's good fun and features a stellar cast, telling the story of George the shepherd, played by Hugh Jackman no less, who each evening reads detective fiction, Agatha Christie and the like, to his flock. When George is murdered, the sheep, led by Lily, 'the most intelligent sheep in the world', set about discovering 'who done it'. As much as I enjoyed the absurdity of the film, there were two things about the movie that jarred with me. The first was the depiction of life in an English village. The fictional 'town' of Denbrook was drawn through American eyes, and it just didn't feel authentic. The second was the idea that sheep live in fear of stepping away from their pasture – that they think they'll die if they try to walk on a tarmacked road. Sheep, and cows for that matter, are foolish animals. A friend of mine spent many years raising livestock on his family's farm on the Somerset levels. His first job every morning was to check that all the animals were where they ought to be, that none had wandered off or fallen into a ditch. I gather that it's the sort of thing now done using drones. But the point is that Jesus was using a very commonplace situation – sheep are very liable to wander off.

The picture of the shepherd is one that would have been understood by his hearers. Not only were they a common sight, working in the local countryside, but they are frequently mentioned in the pages of the Old Testament. God presented himself as the Shepherd of Israel. You see it in the passage from Ezekiel 34 that was read for us. God gathers his scattered sheep, his scattered people. You see it in a more personal way in Psalm 23, '*The LORD is my shepherd ...*' and you can see it in Isaiah 40:11:

*'He tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart: he gently leads those that have young.'*

It's imagery that Jesus applies to himself in the New Testament:

"I am the good shepherd," he says in John 10:11, and then repeats it a few verses later, *"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me."*

The author of the letter to the Hebrews uses the same idea when he writes of *"our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep."* (Hebrews 13:20)

There are many, many instances we could cite.

It's not hard, then, to see that the central character pictured in the parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd, is Jesus himself. Let's take a look, we'll reread the verses.

"⁴ Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep."⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent." (verses 4-7)

I want you to notice three things about this shepherd.

1. This shepherd knows his sheep. Despite the fact that most of us can't distinguish one sheep from another, he is aware when even one is missing and he knows which one it is. You might try to persuade him that he still has 99% of his stock remaining, that it's not really worth his while to search, but he cannot be dissuaded, he must leave the others and go in search of the one that's lost.

I'm told that even these days, when a farmer gets to keep a flock over a long period, they do come to know their animals as individuals. Just like George, the shepherd in The Sheep Detectives, this shepherd knows each of his flock, and knows them by name.

2. This shepherd makes a long and protracted search in difficult country in order to find his lost sheep – Jesus describes the area as 'open' country, it's out into the hills, away from settlement, but despite that he keeps on searching until he finds his sheep. And when he does, he carries the sheep all the way home.

For Jesus, the task of seeking and saving the lost was no picnic. It involved great personal cost and a level of suffering that we cannot imagine. It was not simply the physical pain of the cross and its associated cruelties, but the years of being away from home, including time spent as a refugee in a peasant family, and in the course of time separation from his heavenly Father. The purchase of salvation for the likes of you and me was never going to be cheap or easy, never just say "sorry" and God will be pleased. It was the greatest price possible that had to be paid and the only sacrifice that would meet the awfulness of human sin. Just to finish the quotation from John 10:11: *'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'*

3. This shepherd is so delighted when he retrieves his lost sheep, that he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, *'Rejoice with me.'* (v6)

It's a cause for celebration, a joy to be shared, just like, Jesus says, the joy in heaven when a single penitent sinner turns to God trusting in Jesus Christ. It's not surprising that the earliest Christian art, discovered in the catacombs in Rome, shows a shepherd carrying a sheep on his shoulders, the good shepherd and the sheep that was lost.

So, the first of our Trinity of tales concerns the mission of Jesus himself. Let's look at the second we're considering this morning, the lost coin' or as I'd rather call it:

3. The Lady with the Lamp (v 8-10)

Verses 8 to 10: ⁸ *'Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?'* ⁹ *And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin."* ¹⁰ *In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'*

It might surprise you to learn that there are a large number of children in Scarborough who think that this woman owned a puppy! It's the way that Nicola tells the story, at least at Playsongs, although in Nick Butterworth and Mick Inkpen's retelling of the tale (on which Nicola bases her version) it's a cat that causes the coin to be lost. The problem for Nicola is that she doesn't have a cat puppet.

Actually, there's a lot that Jesus doesn't tell us in this parable. We are not told why or how the coin came to be lost, nor exactly what the significance of the ten coins was. Was it a hoard of silver coins that represented her life savings, or perhaps her dowry? Or did the coins constitute an item of jewellery, a headdress or some such? What does come across is the value, a 'drachma' was roughly a day's wages for a working man, so ten would make up a considerable sum for this woman, in today's terms somewhere between one and two thousand pounds. Like the shepherd in the first story, it would have been useless to explain to her that she still possessed 90% of her investment, only the full set would suffice.

Look at the way this woman sets to work:

1. She lights a lamp. 1st century houses in Palestine were dark, even in daytime. Windows were either non-existent or high and small in order to keep the heat out and make the house comfortable. So, a lamp was vital if she were to complete a successful search.
2. She sweeps the floor. Floors were made of compressed earth and covered with dust brought in from outside (exactly the reason why house guests would have their feet washed on arrival). So, a brush or broom was needed to clear the dirt and dust and reveal the coin.
3. She searches carefully – the whole emphasis here is on the thoroughness of her search.

And when she finds the coin, like the man in the first story, she calls on her friends and neighbours to celebrate the discovery with her and share her joy.

We noted that the story of the lost sheep describes something of the mission of Jesus. The third story, the Prodigal Son, pictures a welcoming father eager for the return of his lost boy. So, who is our Lady with the Lamp? Certainly not Florence Nightingale! Many Christians have identified her actions with those of the third person of the Trinity, as one writer puts it: "The ancient fathers were probably right in seeing reference to the enlightening and penetrating work of the Holy Spirit."

It was pointed out to me many years ago that the work of the Holy Spirit in an individual does not begin with a dramatic post-conversion experience, nor even at the point of conversion, but further back in those niggling questions like: "What happens to people when they die?", "Why is the world in such a mess?", "Is God real?" "What's this Christianity stuff all about?", or even, "Should I be thinking about starting to go to church or reading the Bible?"

It's the Holy Spirit who brings light to our thinking, opens up our eyes to the teaching of Scripture and enables faith in the Lord Jesus; it's the Holy Spirit who transforms us, cleans up our lives and causes us to become more like our Good Shepherd.

4. Lost and Found – the Who? and the Why?

What we have then, is a trinity of tales that together describe the work of the Trinity in salvation. Let's unpack that a little.

- a. The 'who' of salvation. Do you realise that it takes all of God to make your salvation possible? There is a Father to welcome you, a Saviour to seek and save you by taking the punishment for the sin that separates you from the Father's love, and a Spirit who enlightens your mind to the truth and makes Jesus and what he has done real to you. That's how much of God it takes to save you.
- b. The 'why' of salvation. Jesus gives us two good reasons in these two stories.
 1. First - You can't do it for yourself, you are lost! That's what the two things, the sheep and the coin have in common. Not only lost, but in a really bad way. The sheep had wandered so far that it

could not find its way back. Sheep do not have built-in satnavs or internal automated guidance systems; not even 'a good sense of direction'. Similarly, the coin is incapable of finding itself, it is after all an inanimate object incapable of locomotion.

It takes God to do for you, what you cannot do for yourself. You are lost, and you are unable to take the initiative in being found – just like the sheep and the coin. Without God's intervention we are stuck in a bad place and unable to help ourselves.

The second 'why' is this:

2. Second - God's joy in finding what's lost. It may only be one sheep out of a hundred, one coin out of ten, but one lost sinner turning to God in repentance is a huge reason for celebration in heaven, the place where God dwells, the place where the angels stand in his presence. It's worth noting that Jesus does not say that 'the angels rejoice' in verse 10, although I'm sure they do, but that there is '*rejoicing in the presence of the angels*', which surely must mean that it is God himself who rejoices. There is good evidence in the Bible that our God is a God who rejoices and experiences joy – quite apart from these verses:

Take for instance Hebrews 12 :2, '*Jesus, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*'

Or a verse from the Old Testament, from the Minor Prophets:

'The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves.

He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you,

but will rejoice over you with singing.' That's Zephaniah 3:17.

Some people find it hard to believe, but the Christian God is a God who pities lost men and women and wants to save them. Just think of John 3:16 "*God so loved the world (that's the generality of human kind) that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*"

What's more, he wants to share that joy with us. Consider the tales Jesus told that picture heaven as a great banquet, a joyful celebration. And the final words of the master to the faithful servants in the parable of the talents in Matthew's rendering are "*Come and share your master's happiness/your master's joy*". Matthew Henry commenting on those words says, 'here, a few drops of joy enter into us; there we will enter into joy.'

3. But there is a note of warning here too, a sting in the tale. Look back to verse 7: "*I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.*"

Here's a word to the self-righteous Pharisees, the ones who think they're O.K. and grumble when they see lost people being found by Jesus. There's real irony in Jesus' words. Who can claim that they have no need to repent when 'all have sinned'? Who can say that they have no need for God's forgiveness and grace. Don't be fooled, you can't pull yourself into heaven by your own bootstraps, you need a Saviour.

4. So, how can you be like the found sheep or the found coin? It starts by admitting that you're lost, by acknowledging your inability to find yourself. It means coming to the 'one who welcomes sinners'. Those Pharisees meant that description of Jesus as a rebuke, a criticism. In reality, they were absolutely right and without intending to, managed to sum up one of the key truths about Jesus Christ, one of the key reasons why he is Good News.