

One of the most famous names in the insurance business is that of Lloyds of London. A number of years ago there were fears of its collapse when several of its ‘names’ were in danger of not being able to meet their liabilities – this sent shivers through the whole of the insurance world. At the headquarters of Lloyds there is a famous bell that sounds every time a ship insured with Lloyds has been lost at sea. There is a grim finality to that bell. The ship is lost. There is little, if any, hope of recovery.

I mention this bell at Lloyds in the context of our Gospel reading this morning, with the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. As I read them it occurred to me that the English word ‘loss’ has a wide range of meanings ranging from simply mislaying something to losing something beyond all hope of recovery. As I have often remarked, in translating from the Greek in which the new Testament is written, we often find that there are a wide range of words in Greek that can be translated by a single English word. The English word lost is such a case in point. The word used in the Greek text of the portion from St Luke’s Gospel that we translate as ‘lost’ carries with it connotations of destruction – in other words the loss is without reasonable hope of recovery.

With this in mind let us now look at the context within which Jesus told these parables:

<sup>1</sup>All the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus.

<sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ *Luke 15:1*

In the eyes of these men, the people that Jesus was associating with were lost, they were beyond redemption. To put it bluntly they were scum whom no respectable person would associate with; certainly no-one who purported to be a religious teacher. Jesus choice of company simply confirmed their worst suspicions.

Jesus replied with two parables of searching which illustrate God’s concern for that which is lost. As often happens, Jesus chooses as his models of God’s activity people who would be looked down upon by his hearers, people drawn from the underclass of contemporary society. On another occasion he had used a Samaritan; here he uses a shepherd and a

woman. Shepherds were seen very much as the bottom of the social heap by those such as the Pharisees – their occupation inevitably involved breaches of the complex rules of religious purity – not the sort of person you would want your daughter to marry. Women of course occupied a very subordinate position in society. Secondly there is the unrelenting nature of the search – the shepherd scours the countryside, the woman turns her house upside down until that which is lost is found. Finally there is the sheer, undiluted joy in which friends and neighbours are summoned to share in the successful outcome of the search. Such he declares is the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.

A stark contrast is drawn here between the cold piety of the Pharisees, who distance themselves from those they deemed to be lost, the tax collector and the sinner; and the unrelenting search that God undertakes for those who are lost and drifting in the world. A search epitomised in the life and ministry of Jesus – a search that reached out to those whom the Pharisees had given up as lost, the leper, those thought to be possessed by an evil spirit, the halt the blind, the tax collector and the sinner. Reaching out until those very hands that reached out to heal and welcome were nailed to a cross.

The Pharisees represented a spirituality that sought to exclude – the very word ‘Pharisees’ means ‘separated ones’ – to distance itself from those who were deemed impure. Jesus on the other hand was one who reached out to include, the draw in.

Jesus was challenging the Pharisees, who for their part were sincere men who sought diligently to understand and follow God, to join in this unrelenting search of God for those who are lost. This is the challenge that the Church in every time and place cannot afford to ignore. But that leaves me with an uncomfortable question in my own heart. What image do we present to those on the margins, those outside the Church? Can we not sometimes present an image more akin to the Pharisees than that of Christ? I am not suggesting that people are physically barred from our doors – but they can feel uncomfortable, ill at ease. People who have met with misfortune, or have made mistakes

in their personal life, or people who just do not fit in – all can feel wary of Church, wondering how they will be received.

But this is the very place where they should feel welcome as they begin the process of putting their lives together.

We can be very good at guilt – maybe not so good at lifting guilt. I often think back on the words of a colleague, now long retired, when he described the Church as a ‘school for sinners’. A gathering of people who know they are not perfect, who have no illusions about their own perfection, who are able to welcome and draw in others that together they may learn more of God’s love and in their individual and corporate life show something of that love to the world at large.