

When we read Jesus' stories in Luke chapter 15. They are interesting and they are so familiar. They are captivating. Today we hear of the story of the Lost Son, but the stories of the lost sheep and coin are omitted, I suspect for brevity. This is a pity for all three stories are together for a reason and I will refer to them today as a whole.

Suddenly, as we scan these familiar words again, we are caught staring at ourselves. Jesus held the mirror up to us, and we see ourselves. At first we do not even realise it. After all, Jesus talked about sheep and the one that was lost. We are not sheep farmers. This was a tale of people who lived long ago and far away, wasn't it? And then Jesus told the tale of a woman who lost a coin. It dropped and rolled out of sight. She crouched and looked, she swept and moved furniture. She pointed her light into dark corners. Finally, the coin winked, and she reached back into the dusty spaces to reclaim it. She threw a party, and welcomed all the neighbours, sporting her repaired jewellery- bet you not heard that before- as she hosted the event.

Then came the big story which we heard today of a wealthy man with two sons. The older boy was a typical first child — rules and regulations, duty, hard work, rigour and righteousness. The younger son was a spoiled brat that always got what he wanted. He never had to work. He made those eyes and his parents melted, even after party nights out with his friends, drinking, carousing, and destroying property. The brothers clashed, obviously, and the hometown became too small for the worldly younger brat. He left home, coins jingling in his pocket. New friends "loved" him, as long as he was paying for everything. But one day the money ran out, and so did they. Having never learned to earn his way, the wastrel became waste. Only an outcast immigrant farmer would pay him a few cents to do the dirty work every Jew thought reprehensible. He slopped the pigs and crawled up next to them at night. In the wee hours of one restless morning, gnawing hunger in his belly and snorting pigs grunting their noisy dreams, he knew he had to head home. Not, mind you, as the proud son of his privileged family. No, he would grovel back, whimpering and crawling. His wealthy father sustained the local economy; surely there was a place for another casual worker.

Eyes were rolling and heads nodding as Jesus spun the story. Every family had or knew a kid like that, every village knew its lost boys. But then came the Jesus twist. You know he does that. He tells a story, and we get hooked. He weaved a tapestry of things we know, and we are right there with him. He went down a side road we did not even know was there! Suddenly we see things from a completely different perspective. So here comes the Jesus twist. The father was not angry but welcomed his lost boy home. Dad even threw a homecoming party. Meanwhile, righteous older brother was incensed. He did not want to see his worthless brother again, let alone lose his special place as the one and only in his father's home. When we go back and take a second look at these three stories, we realise that Jesus had been doing the "twist" all along. Think about these things: While we like to jump directly to Jesus' most famous story, the one we often call the "Parable of the Prodigal Son," we need to see that Jesus was deliberately stacking these three stories one on top of the other. They are related: a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost person. We don't fully understand what Jesus wanted us to learn from the Parable of the Prodigal Son until we look at the other two parables that it is built upon.

We also need to read the whole of Luke 15 to see the targets of Jesus' stories. Jesus was with the rejects of Jewish society, we are told, the "tax collectors and sinners." These were the lost people of that time. We might think that Jesus was telling these lost people that they could be found. That is

what we would like to think. But notice that Luke told us something quite different was taking place: the religious leaders, Pharisees, and teachers of the law, happened by. They shook their heads and muttered about what a disgusting man Jesus was because of his association with those ghastly sinners. At that moment, Luke said, Jesus turned to them, above the heads of the tax collectors and sinners, and spoke the three stories to them. In other words, Jesus' parables in this chapter were not directed to "lost" people, but to "found" people; not to the outsiders but to the insiders; not to the rejects but to the self-righteous.

We are a bit perplexed about why a lost and found coin should be such a big deal, aren't we? Perhaps coins meant more back then than they do now. Jesus told us that it was a silver coin. Still, why should its loss be so serious and its recovery so significant that the woman threw a party when it was found? She likely spent more on food for her friends and neighbours than the coin was worth in the first place! But this only shows how far separated we are from Jesus' world. The coin was probably bored with a small hole near one edge. It had been slipped with nine other coins onto a leather thong as a necklace. Most certainly this had been given to the woman by her father as a wedding present. It was a testimony from her father of the great esteem he had for her. She wore the necklace every day. Everyone in the community knew it because they never saw her without it. So when one coin wore through to the edge and dropped off the leather thong, it was a serious matter. The necklace was incomplete, broken, less than what it was supposed to be. And if the woman ventured out into the market, or even spent time outside, greeting her neighbours, everyone would notice the lost coin immediately.

That is why she was so intent on finding the coin, restoring the necklace, and celebrating the recovery with her whole village. She was incomplete without it! Then Jesus made the nudge again: so it is with God when just one "worthless" sinner is found and brought back home. Everybody in heaven sings and laughs and has a party!

And that brings us to the big story, the main event. The parable of the prodigal son. There is, again, more here than first meets the eye. And that is where this parable, this unfinished story, becomes for us a mirror. Because we see ourselves for the first time when we look into this tale. We catch sight of ourselves first, in the selfish, stupid, sickened, and surprised eyes of the younger brother, the one who does not merit love and yet receives it from the father in abundance. We are the ones who come home to a father and a family we do deserve. But wait! There's more! Remember the way Luke 15 began? Jesus was with one group of people when another group of people sauntered high-mindedly on by! Who was Jesus with? He was with the lost, the last, and the least. He was with the tax collectors and sinners. Remember the words in the story? He was with people like the younger brother, the prodigal son.

And then, remember to whom Jesus told the three stories: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son? Not to the lost boys around him! No! He told the stories to the proud Pharisees and teachers of the law who strode on past, shooting daggers from their eyes. He told the stories to the righteous religious people who knew they were better than everyone else. He told the stories to the older son, the older brother, and those like him, who disdained the ungodly and happy-go-lucky sinners of this world.

We think we see ourselves in the eyes of the younger brother, the prodigal son — and we do. But Jesus gently pointed our gaze in another direction, until we realise that we are not so much the younger son, the scandalous wastrel, as we are the old brother, the indignant, proudly independent,

righteous and assured church people who believe we have always done the right thing! We suddenly lock eyes with the older son and see our deeply dark and bitter and self- righteous souls. And we are shocked! We are indignant! we are angry! we are Proud!

But Jesus held the mirror there long enough for us to recognise ourselves, if we care to look. And if we ever do, we will be shocked at what we have become, who we thought we were, and what we really are. And then... and then... and then came the strangest turn of all. Because the last gaze Jesus gives us, if we choose to take it- is to look into the powerful, tender, compassionate, gracious, loving eyes of our father — our Father in heaven. We are reflected there too, aren't we? We see ourselves in the mirrors of his eyes. And we are loved.

Fr Robert Newton