

Sermon – Luke 15:1- 10

Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.

There has been much to ponder this week as global events claimed our attention on Friday with the passing of Queen Elizabeth. For many of us, Queen Elizabeth was an icon, quite simply a shining example of service to God and country, and the Commonwealth, to which she had dedicated her life. While many will no doubt mourn the loss of her presence as an enduring figurehead of anglo-saxon culture, I think a life well lived over 96 years, as a faithful Christian disciple, living out her faith every day of her life and for 70 of those years, as the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, showing her trust in God and profound love for God, I think these are reasons to celebrate her life. As the tributes have rolled in over the last couple of days, it's hard to move past her Christian identity. It quite simply shaped her world view and her way of being. She always seemed welcoming and God centred, wherever she went in her globe trotting adventures and her deeply spiritual approach to life enabled her to thrive in her role, a role which must have had challenges and for which she had no real choice. And our Gospel reading today has a lot to say about our spirituality and how we are in the world: about being lost, and being found, and ultimately about rejoicing and thriving. So today we'll focus on the Gospel reading and the lessons it has about thriving in today's context.

Well you might remember that back in Lent I preached on the second half of this chapter 15, with the parable of the lost sons, and we delved into the family dynamics of fathers, sons and brothers and the very significant reflection on our own and God's response to being lost and found. Today we have the two parables that form the precursor to this deeper reflection later

in the chapter. And the chapter launches these parables by opening with a scene in which Jesus is teaching on his journey to Jerusalem and is a response to the push back that he was receiving from the Pharisees and scribes, who were becoming quite threatened by his teachings. And on this particular occasion, the accusation was that “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Jesus’ responds with these parables, which have very consistent thematic repetition of being lost and being found and then being joyful. So I want to explore these three ideas that Jesus is so keen to emphasize in these parables.

Well, the first idea that these parables bring up is in response to the Pharisees’ accusation that Jesus welcomes sinners. So, Jesus presents the concept of being lost: a lost sheep, a lost coin and later on a lost son. Because we’re all sinners, aren’t we? We’re all lost. We’re all, at various times in our lives, separated from God for whatever reasons. I tend to be most lost, in my day to day life, when I allow my drive for perfectionism to separate me from God and also from you. So I love this chapter 15 because it seems as if Jesus is speaking to me, through these three parables, because despite my lostness, Jesus comes looking for me.

And this brings us to our second theme of being found. In the first parable, Jesus talks about the shepherd who actively goes out to find the single lost sheep and when he finds that lost sheep, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. This is a metaphor for God’s grace, undeserved and unearned. When we are lost, when we are separated from God, Jesus comes to find us, he seeks us out and when he finds us, he doesn’t just say “Come on, where have you been?” like I would with one of my sons. He picks us up and carries us home. We don’t deserve this free ride, do we? But that is the

nature of God's grace. Despite our regular falls and our regular wanderings away from God, Jesus is there to find us, and bring us home. Our spiritual health, our acceptance of God's saving grace, is what leads us to be thriving in our faith.

And this leads us to the third theme in these parables, the theme of joy. When we are thriving in our faith, we are joyful. Both the shepherd, and the woman in the second parable say, "Rejoice with me" when they find the sheep or the coin. We are all invited to be joyful when we return to God, when we accept God's grace. And I think this is what spiritual thriving is. I am at my best when I accept and trust that God has my back, that what I do, I do in his strength, not mine. God will work through me, but I need to accept his embrace for that to happen. So this brings us to our conversation on thriving, the third word, in our Vision collection. Let's take some time to consider it at a personal level and then at a parish level.

Let's take some time to talk in small groups, what does it mean to be thriving, firstly as a person? How do you thrive? How does your identity as a disciple of Jesus lead to personal thriving?

In our second tranche of questions, let's look at how we thrive as a parish. What does that look like? Does it look different to how we are now? What shows us that we are a thriving parish?

I hope you have enjoyed this interactive series on our new Vision, and that it now has some meaning and application for you. I hope that when you think of our parish Vision, you do say Welcoming, God Centred, Thriving, and that you do have a sense of what that means for you personally and for us a parish. Next week, we are going to start unpacking our Values and we'll make it interactive again, and you will be hearing from other members of our preaching team.

Let us pray. Loving, generous and gracious God, we thank you that you love us with unflinching and joyful generosity even when we have strayed from your home. Give us the strength, wisdom and insight to return to you and accept your grace. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.