

**Trinity 13      All Saints Church, Horseheath, 15 September, 2019**

‘Has anyone seen my keys?... I know I put them on the kitchen table, but *someone*, must have moved them?’ Sound familiar? Or ‘Mum, I’ve lost my games kit and I need it today, well actually right now, as I have an important match this afternoon.’

Losing things is part of daily life. Its very annoying, frustrating and can be quite serious. When we moved house a couple of years ago, our cat, Chloe (not the brightest of creatures at the best of times) seemed to have worked out the local area but must then have got herself confused and did not return home. We put posters up and emailed everyone we knew locally. Everyone was so considerate, and messages of consolation and possible sightings came flooding in.

When at last she was found by some dustbins over two weeks later, there was of course much rejoicing in the Wilcockson household and indeed by all those who understood what it is like to lose a much-loved household pet. Strange, I thought, that one small creature could generate so much concern and then joy.

These little moments of losing and finding continue the theme of last week’s readings of sin and restoration – that is of finding ourselves, being self-absorbed and forgetful of God’s love and then being brought back into relationship with him through Christ.

All the gospels deal with this theme, but it is Luke who makes it the centre-piece of his gospel through the losing and finding parables we know so well – the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son - all found in Luke 15, the mid-point of his gospel.

Of the three parables only one is about a human person, the other two are not. That poses us with a bit of a problem as they all seem to be about the lost sinner who repents and is then found or restored to God’s loving care.

Clearly a sheep or a coin can't repent! So, what these two parables are focussing on is the extraordinary love God has for each and everyone of us, however insignificant we might think we appear to him.

For the shepherd might have thought, 'I have a large herd, accidents happen so I'll be content with the 99 sheep I do have.'

The woman might have said to herself, 'One drachma is a day's wages, but if I spend all day looking for it, I could have earned that money by working.'

But the answer to each of them is that one sheep or one coin or one small cat called Chloe represents the value each person has however insignificant they may think we they are.

Another oddity is that the parables rather bizarrely say the shepherd and the woman invite their friends and family round for a party to rejoice in finding one lone sheep and one small coin. The extravagant parties, we might think, are rather disproportionate to the value of the lost item.

But then these are no ordinary parties, for the family and friends are metaphors of God and his angels and the shepherd and the woman represent Jesus and his ministry to the sinners, the 'lost' members of his community such as tax collectors, the poor, women i.e. all those whom society marginalises.

Someone who really understood the experience of being lost – lost emotionally, lost morally and lost spiritually and who found himself rescued by his experience of God's abundant love and mercy, was the 18<sup>th</sup> century prolific hymn writer and pastor, John Newton.

You may well know his story, but here it is again.

John Newton was born in 1725 and from a young age worked on the slave ships exporting black slaves to America. He had many adventures including being given to as a slave dealer's wife as slave himself and to her tribe in west Africa.

In 1748 his father sent out a sea captain to find him and he was rescued and brought back to England. During the journey back on the ship *Greyhound* they ran into a tremendous storm off the coast of Ireland and they almost sank.

During the two-week period of the storm Newton read the Bible and wondered whether someone who had so often rejected and mocked God as he had done could possibly be redeemed. At the height of the violence of the storm he called out to God for his mercy; he came to realise the foolishness of his life and how utterly lost he had become. Then dramatically on 10 March, 1748 he got his answer, he experienced God's grace and that he had been forgiven, that he was no longer lost but found.

However, his full conversion was to come later when he finally realised the evils of slavery and he then worked as an abolitionist. A few years later he was ordained priest and became curate of Olney where he was known for his work, especially among the poor and marginalised.

At Olney he began to write a large number of hymns, many of which we still sing today, such as 'Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken' and 'How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds!' But the most celebrated of all is his 'Amazing Grace' which he wrote originally to illustrate his sermon on New Year's Day, 1773. It captures that moment in 1748 when lost at sea, lost in body and lost in spirit he felt God's amazing love and grace. Here are the opening words:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now I'm found;  
Was blind but now I see.

The experience of God's grace need not be dramatic. For many of us it is a quiet assuring presence. We need to remember this especially when we do feel lost or have wavered in our faith because whether we think we deserve it or not, God's generous love is always there to receive us.