



St Mark's Lenten Study 2009

Finding Jesus

As he was walking along by the Lake of Galilee he saw Simon and Simon's brother Andrew casting a net in the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Come after me and I will make you into fishers of people.' And at once they left their nets and followed him. Going on a little further, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John; they too were in their boat, mending the nets. At once he called them and, leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with the men he employed, they went after him.¹

In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house and went off to a lonely place and prayed there. Simon and his companions set out in search of him, and when they found him they said, 'Everybody is looking for you.' He answered, 'Let us go elsewhere, to the neighbouring country towns, so that I can proclaim the message there too, because that is why I came.' And he went all through Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out devils.²

Lost and Found

In some respects the journey of faith is best understood as a quest – a seeking for that which our hearts yearn for. St Augustine says this so well in his prayer;

*Thou hast made me for thyself,
and my heart is restless,
until it finds its rest in thee.³*

This is what in the early church was known as *the Way* – in fact the first Christians were nicknamed *The Way*⁴ because they followed Jesus also known as *the Way*⁵. Deep in all of us there is a need to find and be found, to know and be known. As Christians we believe that we are created in the image and likeness of God and therefore part of our coming to full maturity as human beings is to recognise our need to be reunited with God in a deep way. In fact, it is so deep that we very often only catch glimpses of it. I once wrote a poem in an attempt to express this;

The tired mist in the midst of a given moment
veils the burning brightness of the sown seed.
Yet even mist can moisten the dark earth,
cold cradle of unknown growing.

Those things most often looked for remain unseen
but in the gaze turning,
the eyes closing,
the brief lapse of concentration,
comes the revelation of what is most real.⁶

Our God is a God of surprises. An easy mistake to make is to assume that we have arrived, that we have found what we have been looking for and we are now in possession of the truth. Of course it would be correct to say that in our search for God we can come to a revelation of God through Jesus Christ who in John's gospel says, "I am truth"⁷. Indeed, Paul tells us the truth about Jesus is that he is the *visible image of the invisible God*⁸ and as such we find in him the reality of God, because truth is reality⁹. But we do not possess the truth, rather the truth possesses us, and such a revelation is only the beginning of our journey.

Even before we consciously began our search for God - God had already been in pursuit of us and any *breakthrough* moment we may have is really only a disclosure of God's activity that has been taking place in each of us secretly since before we were even born. This is where our confidence comes from – not that we find faith, or find Jesus, or find God but that God has set himself the task of finding us. Jesus made this very clear in the following three parables as found in Luke.

The lost sheep¹⁰

In this parable Jesus speaks to those from rural backgrounds who would strongly identify with the precious commodity of sheep. Sheep represented wealth and wellbeing and the thought of even one being lost would create an anxiety that would require immediate action. The ninety-nine are fine and safe in the keeping of the fold but the one is out there somewhere and as far as we know has no thought of being found. The emphasis is on the simple fact that the shepherd has one aim and will not rest until that aim has been achieved – to find the one sheep.

The lost coin¹¹

In this parable Jesus appeals to the women of the crowd who would strongly identify with the domestic situation to which he refers. A drachma would be a significant loss since historians have valued it at a day's wage. So, the thought of such a loss would set the hearts of his listeners racing and similarly the thought that God would place such a value on a single person would do the same. This is a parable stating the intrinsic value of a single human life. Such is the passion of the Father for all of humanity. Again there is effort and passion involved in the woman's determination to find the lost drachma.

The lost son¹²

The climax to the first two stories is the one that would speak to the hearts of all those who were listening. However, as usual with the teaching of Jesus it would not please everyone. This time he tells the story of a lost son and a Father who longs to find him. There is a difference here in as much as it would appear that the initiative is the son's. It is when he is at his lowest point that he makes the decision to return to his father and beg him to at least allow him to be a servant in his household. But if we look carefully at this tale we will see that the initiative lies with the father's ability to take a risk and allow the son to take his inheritance even with the possibility that he will squander it. The story is a familiar one to many and describes how the son does indeed squander everything on pleasure seeking. He arrives at rock bottom and decides to return and beg for forgiveness. The next phrase paints a very poignant picture that the crowd would have been well able to visualize;

*While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him.*¹³

Here we see the portrait of the father that Jesus was painting in all of its wonderful glory and grace. The suggestion is that the father had sat scouring the landscape maybe from day one of his son's departure longing to see his return. Even in the face of believing him to be dead he did not give up on his search in the hope that he would find him;

this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was *lost and is found*.¹⁴

The father does not even wait for a full act of repentance and absolution and even as his lost son is making his confession the father is making arrangements for a banquet in his honour – such amazing grace! This would have been an offence to some of those listening in the crowd who were trapped within a religious system that required the necessity of rules and regulations. This boy was unclean – he had after all been eating and sleeping with swine – a Jewish symbol of utter defilement. He was unclean! The attitude of the eldest son as described in this story was intended to speak to the hearts of those who were reacting in this way – offended by Jesus' depiction of the heavenly father. This is God in pursuit of us says Jesus and God is in pursuit of us because he has need of us.

God has need of you

The underlying message of these parables is that God instigates the disclosure of himself to us for his own good pleasure.¹⁵ The initiative is all God's and the implication is that God has need of us/you. Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher, puts it this way;

You know, always, in the depths of your heart, that you have need of God, more than of anything else. But do you not know that God also has need of you, that he, from the fullness of his eternity, needs you?¹⁶

This is what lies at the heart of God's purpose in revealing himself through Jesus Christ to us. To be *in Christ*, to use St Paul's language, is to recognise that we are only able to know because we are known. Put another way, we are only able to love because he first loved us.¹⁷ The initiative is all God's. This flies in the face of the idea that somehow God is distant and unable to even look upon us because we are unclean or unacceptable to him. Indeed Jesus, the image of the invisible God, the one to whom we must look in order to see what God is like, himself chose to embrace those who in the society of his day were regarded as being outside the fold (lost) and unclean (religiously impure). Little wonder then that Jesus cried out,

*Come to me all who are weighed down by the religious requirements imposed upon you and I will give you space to find rest and refreshment. The yoke of religious zeal is heavy but my yoke of freedom through faith in the grace of God the father is not burdensome, it is benevolent and not difficult to bear.*¹⁸

To Know and be Known

In the same sense that it is God who finds us rather than we who find God we can also appreciate that we are known by God before ever we know God. Paul even goes as far as to say that presently we can only know God imperfectly, as if we are gazing through a glass darkly but one day we will know God as he knows us¹⁹ – face to face. Whether we like it or not this is another indication that we know God through faith and not perception since we cannot perceive God because God is entirely other than we are. Even in knowing God through Jesus we are dealing with riddles and reflections²⁰ rather than clear facts and figures. This is why Paul emphasizes the need for faith throughout his teaching – faith in the mystery of God's grace rather than any comprehension or certainty we may think we have of God. This is wonderful news for those who cannot deny that they sometimes have to wrestle with their doubts on their journey of faith. This is the risk of faith and the commitment to the conviction that even in the midst of uncertainty I can be alive to God and the reality of my experience of his love through his revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. It also prevents me from believing I am somehow in possession of absolute truth – a dangerous position to be in as the history of the church teaches us.²¹ Faith keeps us humble whereas certainty in what we think we know puffs us up. Paul warns against this, saying that, it is love that builds up but knowledge (certainty) that puffs up²². He goes on again to emphasise that it is God's knowledge of us rather than our knowledge of him that has to be central to our faith saying,

*Someone may think that he has full knowledge of something and yet not know it as well as he should; but someone who loves God is known by God.*²³

Again and again the emphasis is on the initiative of God and the need for faith in the revelation of that initiative in Jesus Christ. Therefore we can rejoice in the reality of our experience of Jesus regardless of how able we are to grasp the length, depth, height and breadth of his love. Indeed it is only when we understand that such knowledge is beyond us that we are then able to grasp it through faith rather than intellect;

*This, then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every fatherhood, in heaven or on earth, takes its name. In the abundance of his glory may he, through his Spirit, enable you to grow firm in power with regard to your inner self, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, with all God's holy people you will have the strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; so that, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond knowledge, you may be filled with the utter fullness of God. Glory be to him whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory be to him from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.*²⁴

¹Mk 1:16

²Mk 1:35

³ St Augustine, *Confessions*

⁴ Acts 9.2

⁵ John 14.6

⁶ Hadge Hughes, *The Gaze Turning*

⁷ John 14.

⁸ Colossians 1.15

⁹ The Greek word for truth *aletheia* means *reality*.

¹⁰ Luke 15.4-7

¹¹ Luke 15.8-10

¹² Luke 15.11-31

¹³ Luke 15.20

¹⁴ Luke 15.24

¹⁵ Ephesians 1.5

¹⁶ Martin Buber was a Jewish mystic and philosopher in the existentialist tradition born in Austria 1878. This quote is from his ground breaking work *I and Thou* described as a 'philosophical-religious poem' expressing his conviction that human beings find meaning only in relationship to the *other* and ultimately the *Thou* which is the *other* is God. In other words, outside of a relationship to God my life has no meaning. He would contend that all our relationships bring us to a relationship with God who is the eternal Thou. Christians have further drawn from his work that Jesus is also the *Thou* that the *I* finds ultimate meaning in.

¹⁷ 1 John 4.19

¹⁸ Matthew 11.28

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 13.12

²⁰ The Greek word Paul uses in this verse is *ainigma* which is where we get our english word enigma from, also translated as obscure or riddle. Mirrors were not made of silvered glass as they are today but from burnished metal and often gave only an obscure image or reflection. Paul is using this as a metaphore for our knowledge of God emphasising that faith comes before knowledge. This is why Anselm (f Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 to 1109) described theology as *faith seeking understanding*.

²¹ Religious wars and acts of terror are often instigated by those who believe themselves to be possession of absolute truth

²² 1 Corinthians 8:1

²³ 1 Corinthians 8.2-3

²⁴ Ephesians 3.14-21