



Sermon preached by Richard Lewney on 14th September 2025

Readings: Psalm 51:1-10; Luke 15: 3-24; 1 Timothy 1:12-17

In one of my U3A courses last year, we were studying the history of the French film industry. One interesting period was during the Second World War when France was occupied. Goebbels established Continental, the only authorized film production company, funded by the Nazi government. And all film producers had to get their films passed by the Nazi-controlled censor.

Film-makers faced a choice. Should they accept commissions to work on films funded by Continental and risk being branded as collaborators? Should they make films funded by other sources and submit to the censor? Should they leave France and work in the American film industry? I wonder what I would have done.

Of course, the backdrop to the New Testament times was the occupation of the land by the Romans. And the Jewish people faced the question: how should we respond to this occupation? Which prompted another question: where is God in all this? Let's remind ourselves of some of the responses that we know about.

Some said that it was better to die on your feet than live on your knees. They were the zealots, they incited rebellions, sometimes with leaders who claimed the title of Messiah, deliberately provoking a brutal response from the Romans so as to motivate a full-scale revolt. Some said that it was better to live on your feet than die on your knees, and they became collaborators: client rulers, the Sadducees, tax collectors. Some refused to participate in a society that was contaminated by the presence of the infidel Romans, and they withdrew to build the kingdom of God in isolated communities.

And some trusted in God to bring deliverance to the people and the land, to send the true Messiah, to establish the kingdom of God. They drew lessons from the prophets who spoke at the time of the Exile. They believed that the day of deliverance would come when the people of God once more were faithful, once more would turn back to the Law and weep over their shortcomings. The right way to respond to the Roman occupation was not to fight it as terrorists, not to profit from it as collaborators, not to withdraw from it as isolationists, but to trust in God's mercy and live lives of obedience and purity and so usher in God's deliverance. And the name of the people who believed that was ... the Pharisees.

And if you're a Pharisee, calling people to live a life of obedience and purity as a matter of urgency, to bring an end to the suffering of the Roman occupation, what do you make of Jesus of Nazareth? Is he one of us? After all, he says that the kingdom of God is near, is breaking in; he calls people to repent, to turn to God; he speaks of the importance of faith, even faith as small as a mustard seed ... But he healed the slave of one of the invading army, a Roman centurion. He welcomes the tax collectors and prostitutes, the collaborators. He shares a meal with them, with all the acceptance that eating together indicates. He has a known zealot among his closest followers. He touches lepers, for God's sake. He has no respect or desire for purity when the whole history of our people tells us that purity is what God requires of us.

So let's read again the opening verses of Luke 15:

'Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

It wasn't just a matter of convention, or snobbery, like the hostility of the family at Downton Abbey to the decision of one of the daughters to marry the chauffeur. The stakes were much higher. If Jesus continued to indulge bad behaviour, and if his popularity continued to grow, the people wouldn't turn back to God and God wouldn't send his Messiah to deliver them.

That's the context for the confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees, and it sets the scene for the three famous parables about things that are lost. We read two of them this morning: the lost sheep and the lost coin. The third is perhaps the most famous of Jesus' parables - the Lost Son, or the Prodigal Son.

Sometimes when we read these parables, we focus on the one who does the searching. The shepherd who risks life and limb to find and rescue just one lost sheep. The woman who turns her house upside down to find her lost coin. The father who longs for the return of his wayward son, and rushes to embrace him when he shows up. How amazing, we say, that the shepherd, or the woman, or the father, go to extraordinary lengths for just one who went missing. It's a picture, we say, of the amazing love of God.

I've certainly said that myself, but I'm not sure that it quite gets Jesus' emphasis here. Because when he describes what the shepherd, the woman and the father do, he expects his hearers to react not with admiration but with recognition.

'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?' [It seems crazy, but actually that's what we do, isn't it?]

'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?'

The answer is: 'of course that's what we do'. The searcher isn't doing something extraordinary: they're doing what we all do. When we lose something, we don't give thanks for all the other stuff we haven't lost. We search for the thing that we've lost, and when we find it we're elated, even though we're no better off than we were before we lost it.

That's why Jesus' story about the Lost Son includes the conversation between the father and the elder brother. It's true that there hasn't been a party for the elder brother, celebrating his continuing faithfulness. And it's true that that's not fair. On that reading, the father isn't just like God; he's just like us. He doesn't show enough appreciation for the elder son's faithfulness, just as the shepherd and the woman never threw a party for the sheep and the coins that were never lost. But how could they not celebrate that the sheep, the coin, the son that was lost and had been found?

The power of these parables is that they lead us to realise 'yes, that's what I do too'. It seems crazy, but yes we celebrate most the recovery of the one that was lost, not the many who were never lost.

And so, says Jesus, that's why I hang out with the people who are on the outside, rather than those on the inside. The Pharisees had taken one strand in Scripture, maintaining the distinctiveness of the people of God, and lost sight of another, God's longing to restore and renew those who've lost their way. Later on in Luke, that's why Jesus celebrates the restoration of Zacchaeus, the Jew who was lost to collaboration and extortion:

'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost'. [That's what God's like]

It reminds us, or at least it reminds me, of that William Temple quotation cited in various forms, such as:

'The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.'

In Bar Hill Church, when we were in vacancy a few years ago, we did an exercise. We wrote on a large sheet of paper all the different kinds of activities that we, as a church, were or could be involved in. Then, we asked ourselves ‘among all of these, where do we think our new minister should be committing the bulk of their time?’ Each of us was given 5 sticky coloured dots, and they were like votes that we could stick alongside any of the activities. We could put more than one dot on one activity if we so wished. Remember, we weren’t voting on what the *church’s* priorities should be, but rather where the *minister* should be committing their time.

Activities which engaged with folk outside of the church received a good number of votes, which seemed right in our context. It implied that the rest of us would make sure that important activities more directed towards the needs of insiders were covered. Now, a couple of years into Wendy’s ministry, we should really revisit that and see whether the reality matches up to our intentions.

And I wonder, when the time comes for Downing Place to think about the way you present yourselves to prospective ministers, how you will describe the emphases in mission that you sense God calling you to just now and the role of your next minister in that.

Richard Lewney
14 09 2025