

Comfortably Numb....?

LOST AND FOUND

I used to travel up to Spurgeon's with Trevor Withers. Trevor was part of Trafalgar Road Baptist Church at the time. When we finished training he moved to Harpenden to be part time leader of a cell church and to work part time for Cell Church U.K. with Lawrence Singlehurst. Trevor and I were different: he was on the Evangelism and Outreach course, I was on the pastoral course ; he wanted to ask lots of questions, I wanted to know the answers; he was part of a church that didn't have and didn't want a building, I was part of a church that was about to plunge into a redevelopment project; he was part of a church plant, I was part of a church that chose to go to two services and not church plant. Trevor liked ambiguity – things to be open ended, I liked to be a little surer of what was going to happen.

We had some fascinating journeys to college – making up the route as we went trying to avoid the traffic, talking about these issues. Trevor liked films that had questions remaining at the end, I liked films where I knew what happened, how it happened and who did it! Trevor's idea of a good film was one that left you asking: what was that about? And what happened? I like a film with a twist – as long as I know that there is a twist and what it is!

I think Trevor would love the TV series 'Lost'. Anyone into 'Lost?' 'Lost' is about a plane that supposedly crashes onto an island, and the story is what happens to the people who are 'lost' on this island. Lisa and I started to watch the series on DVD, but I didn't last long. The reason I didn't last long was that someone told me that 'Lost' doesn't have an end! It's one of those plots that's designed to keep you guessing. I thought – I'm not going to sit through six series of this only to find out I haven't a clue what it's about. So I quit watching. Lisa carried on – and after six series I don't think she has much of a clue as to what it's all about!

The genius of Jesus story of a father and his two sons is he doesn't tell us the ending. When we started this series I thought I pretty much knew what this story was about and what it meant, but I've changed my mind. I've discovered a whole lot of new challenges in this series, and I've discovered a story without an ending, and I find that profoundly challenging. One question it leaves me with is this: "So who exactly is lost and who exactly is found?"

If I give an instant response I think I know the answer because the story appears to tell us. But let me ask you all this question: "Who here is lost, and who is found?" Friends we are writing the ending. It is for us to answer this question – not to be giving a verbal answer, but in how we live out our response. Somebody once said: "It's not how you started the Christian life that's important, it's how you end it!" So – what ending are you writing – what's your story? Lost or found?

As the story comes to a head everyone wants to know what the father says to his older son. The music has come to a grinding halt, the dancing has stopped and there is tension in the room. The father has left to go and speak with his other son and nobody's quite sure what to do. This party, this celebration has suddenly turned into a bit of a nightmare as sometimes family gatherings do.

Everyone's hoping big brother will come in and they can start up the music again and enjoy the celebration. There's a sense of shock around how the elder son spoke to his father – no-one could quite believe what they saw. And now the father has gone graciously to find his son. We are left hanging – there is no ending! Perhaps the elder son realised what was going on and tearfully but genuinely embraced his father and returned to the party to celebrate his brother's return. Perhaps he stomped off and hid in the fields.

The Pharisees were standing listening, watching carefully as Jesus came to this point in the story. They knew that what Jesus was really saying to them was: "And how will this end with you?" They'd begun this whole thing by complaining that Jesus met with sinners – the wrong kinds of people. Now Jesus is asking them: so what should happen with sinners? And they haven't missed the point! They know very well that they are the elder brother. They understand very well that Jesus question is to them: So, will you see that you guys, the elder brother, are

sinner too? They complained that Jesus ate with sinners. Now Jesus points out that if he can't eat with sinners, then he can't eat with Pharisees either.

Friends, how about you? If Jesus can't eat with the wrong kinds of people, then he can't eat with you! We will gather around communion later. You get the point don't you? "Come to this table, not because you must, but because you may. Come not to testify that you are perfect, but that you are a sinner who is welcomed by the open arms of a father who loves you because he loves you.... come not because you have any claim on heaven's reward, but because in your frailty and sin you stand in constant need of heaven's mercy and help."

You can come to this table, this service, this church, this community and be part of this story precisely because there are no wrong kinds of people. Jesus wants to eat with sinners, because he wants to eat with you!

There's another question hanging as Jesus comes to the end of his story. The story was told in response to their criticism of Jesus, and now the question is, having heard him out, having listened to the story, what will they do with him? They were proved right, of course, Jesus is a friend of sinners!

But would they now look at themselves in the light of the story and begin to question much of what they did and how they behaved? Would they see that much of what they did was in fact useless and destructive and really nothing to do with the kingdom of God? Or would they fight – fight all that Jesus had said and those Jesus said he loved? What would they do with Jesus? In truth we don't know what those listening actually did. But it seems their response – or at least the response of the Pharisees, was mixed. From the evidence some of them would have ended the story this way:

"And the elder brother, enraged at his father, picked up a piece of wood, and struck him with it. The father died."¹

It was the Pharisees who rejected Jesus and helped the conspiracy that led to his death. There were other Pharisees who did follow Jesus and we read about them

¹ Lucas, Geoff: *"Creating a Prodigal Friendly Church"*, Zondervan 2008 page 170

in Acts! Mind you some of them caused havoc in the early church – so big brother can still be difficult even in the church! As Jesus finishes his story, he looks them in the eye and silently asks: ‘So, what will you do with me?’ Philip Yancey says our response to Jesus is absolutely crucial. So, how about you, what is your response to this Jesus and his story about two prodigal sons? Who is lost and who is found? Will you take this story and reflect on your own life?

You know as I’ve reflected on this a thought I had challenged me: is it possible that those who think they are found, are in fact lost? Wasn’t that true of the Pharisees, at least some of them, probably all of them? They had it all worked out, they knew who was lost and who was found. But by the end of his story Jesus was asking – so who exactly is lost?

I wonder how many here today are thinking they are found, when in truth they are lost? Lost in stubbornness and pride; lost in prejudice; lost in anger or resentment; lost in un-forgiveness and bitterness; lost in jealousy or envy; lost in worldliness or materialism or consumerism; lost in self belief; lost in apathy; lost in following our own dreams; lost because we don’t take seriously the radical challenge to follow Christ daily and be his true disciples.

Lost or found – how about you? Perhaps in truth some of us have never chosen to come in and been welcomed by the embrace of our father in heaven. Friends – how about you? It’s not about going to church, serving in church, doing the right things, saying the right things, being with the right people. It’s about embrace with the father who loves you because he loves you...How about you?

The story has to be continued. We have to write the ending, and one way or another we will do exactly that, we will write and live out our response to the story of the two prodigal sons. We will live it out as individuals, in our own lives and we will live it out as a community.

There was one Pharisee who wasn’t present that day when Jesus told his story. He described himself as a Pharisee of Pharisees – he was definitely big brother in the story. He hated the people Jesus loved and he went around killing Christians. But when he encountered the risen Jesus he changed. Saul was a firebrand

determined to get rid of those who followed Jesus, but Saul chose to come in from the outside and join the party – celebrating with those Jesus loved. Saul was lost, but he was found by the powerful all embracing love of the father. When Saul was touched by the grace of the father he changed.

Paul showed that changed lives are possible and he welcomed those welcomed by his father and he spent the rest of his life as a radical follower of Christ – bringing grace and freedom to others.

So who is lost and who is found?

Well, as much as I'd love to give you the answer and tell you how it all works out, I have to leave you to write the ending. But what an ending that might be.... you and your father together...writing... well...Over to you!

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 18th April 2010 by Rev. Ian Phillips.