

THREE INVITATIONS INTO JOY

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Alison Sampson, reflecting on Luke 15:1-10ff

‘Would you like a drink?’ I asked our friend Carl. ‘No thanks,’ he said. ‘Is that an Anglo no, or a Lebanese no?’ I asked. Our friend Carl is from a Lebanese family. In Lebanon, if someone offers you a drink, it is the height of rudeness to say yes straightaway. It might be 36 degrees, you might have walked across Beirut to get there, you might be so dry your tongue is sticking to the roof of your mouth. But you graciously say no, giving your host the opportunity to demonstrate their generous hospitality by offering again, and again, and again. By the sixth time, you can finally say ‘Yes, actually, now I come to think of it, and in response to your exquisite hospitality, perhaps I could manage a small drink!’ Then your host pours you a long cool glass of something refreshing, and hovers at the ready to refill it.

I am reminded of this practice by today’s stories. First, we meet a shepherd who has lost a sheep. So, we are told, he abandons ninety-nine sheep, the ones who are obedient and have ‘no need’ of repentance. He leaves the flock to fend for itself as he wanders up hill and down dale, seeking that hopelessly lost sheep until he finds it by its piteous bleats. And when he does find it, he’s so delighted that he throws it over his shoulders and carries it to safety, then invites his friends and neighbours over to celebrate.

Then we meet a woman. She had ten coins, but one has gone missing. So she abandons her housework. Instead of the washing and the cooking and the sewing and the cleaning, she turns the house upside down. Finally, hips aching, knees creaking, bottom sticking out, she bends down low and shoves her broom into the furthest corner under the bed. She hears a little clink. When she finally fishes out the coin, she’s so delighted that she invites her friends and neighbours over to celebrate.

Then there’s a third story, which for reasons I’ve never understood is usually divorced from these two readings and heard only in Lent. This is a story about a father with two sons. The youngest son takes his inheritance and goes far away, squandering everything on wine, women and song. For many years, he’s lost to his father. But one day, finding himself poor, broke, hungry, living in squalor and having broken every taboo, he wakes up to himself. Eventually, he finds his way home. Even before he gets there, his father sees him coming. Forsaking all dignity, the father hitches up his skirts and runs out to greet his son. Then the father walks him home, and – hear the echo? – invites his friends and neighbours over to celebrate.

But in this third story, there's a twist. For there's the other son. He's the classic oldest child, reliable, predictable, dutiful. Resentful. He's never understood the hospitality of the household in which he lives; he's never enjoyed the abundance that is already his; he's never thrown even a small party for his friends; and for this, he blames his dad. And so, in his resentment and rage, he is lost to his father: and the triptych of stories ends there.

Do you want a drink? Do you want mercy? Will you join the party? Three times, Jesus tells the story. Three times, he holds out the hand of friendship. Three times, he invites his audience to enter into joy. Do they accept the invitation? We don't yet know.

Those of us who are churchgoers usually know how to read the first two stories: Get out there. Find some sinners. Bring them back to the fold. Be happy when they are united with the church and sin no more. For a while, this was the only reading I knew. As a result, I felt terrible shame. A very shy and socially awkward young person, I was bailed up by some pretty aggressive evangelicals at university and demanded to account for myself. How many souls had I brought to Jesus this week? How often had I shared my faith? For the world is full of lost things and it was my job to convert them. I had to bring them over the line, through the waters, onto the high road to heaven. I could barely talk to strangers, let alone lead them to Jesus. It was soon very clear I had failed all my Christian KPI's, and so I felt deeply ashamed.

But the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin belong with the story of the lost sons. Reading them together, I think Jesus is saying something else. It's not that we shouldn't share our faith. We should: it's good news! It's just that these particular stories are not about this. As churchgoers, it can be comfortable to imagine that the lost sheep is some poor misguided soul outside the church, and the lost coin also, but notice: The lost sheep was part of the flock, but went wandering. The lost coin was part of the collection, but rolled away. The lost sons were both part of the household, but only one entered into his father's joy.

So these are stories about religious insiders getting lost, and being lost, and not doing a thing to find their way home. The sheep is just a wandering sheep, as likely to walk towards the lion's den as the sheepfold. The coin is not even sentient; it just lies on the floor in some dark and dusty corner. The oldest son is surrounded by abundance which is his for the taking, but, 'Yeah, nah, I'm fine,' he says, all the while thinking, 'You mean old bastard.'

Jesus is telling these stories to self-righteous religious types who are grumbling about the people he's eating and drinking with. For the religious types find him in the midst of sinners and tax collectors, that is, people who

aren't respectable. People whose lives are a muddle. People who are excluded from communal religious practice. People who have been humiliated and rejected and made to feel endless shame.

The scribes and Pharisees are so obsessed with religious identity markers, they can't recognise the humanity of these people. The only thing they notice is their sin. They seek to protect themselves from religious contamination by avoiding these sinful people, but here Jesus is, eating with them. So the religious types are deeply offended by Jesus' refusal to judge the sinners. They resent his proclamation of God's abundant mercy, hospitality and grace. They are disgusted by the ways he embodies this proclamation, and they are furious that his teaching is perceived as having authority; perhaps he undercuts their stranglehold on power. Ultimately, we know, they become so enraged that they lobby for Jesus' crucifixion, but here, for now, they simply grumble.

In gospel terms, they're lost; but like the coin, the sheep, and the oldest son, they don't acknowledge it. To these poor lost religious insiders, then, those people who don't think they are lost and assume they never will be, Jesus offers an invitation into joy. They don't need to grumble or feel angry or resentful any more. All they need do is enter into their lostness. For it's the lost who are found, the dead who are raised to life, and the hungry who will be filled. Jesus has come to fill empty people with divine joy, even religious insiders: and when their hearts crack open to the generosity of God, even the angels will sing.

How then, do they, perhaps we, get some of this joy?

Many years ago, there was a man who spent his days walking up and down the busy traffic bridge into Fremantle. He wore a sandwich board reading: 'Repent and be saved!' Like many Christians, he had a transactional theology. Repent, and God will forgive you. Reorient your life, and you'll go to heaven. Shout to the Lord how awful you are, and you might even get to be loved. Do the thing, get the thing, that's how the world works.

But Jesus doesn't operate on these terms. 'You are always here with me,' says the father to the oldest son, 'and everything I have is yours.' (Luke 15:31). You cannot work for it. You don't need to strive for it. Nothing you do can make you lose it. It's always already yours. All you can do is accept it.

And like the sheep, the coin and the older brother, like the cynics of Psalm 14, like the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' audience, and like so many of us, we may not even know when we are lost. Yet the shepherd, the woman, the loving father and Jesus will still seek us out, and will always throw a party when we're found. For it is the nature of God to know when we are lost, even when we do not. And when this happens, God doesn't

ignore us; God doesn't dismiss us; God doesn't write us off as disobedient or fruitless or stubborn. God doesn't reject us as hard-hearted or faithless or hopeless. God doesn't discard us as foolish or deranged. Instead, God feels the loss keenly and seeks us out actively and rejoices so greatly when we're reunited that the world erupts with delight. So there's no need to worry about being lost or what to do: because God will always seek us out.

This means of course that God will never be limited to church or creed or doctrine or any sense of religious complacency. Instead, God's off seeking, and we are most likely to be found by God not when we are religiously righteous and clutching all the answers, but precisely at the times that we are lost. In other words, God seeks us in our doubt and confusion; when we're wandering the wilderness of dementia; when we're bewildered and vulnerable and afraid. God seeks us in our questions and our doubt and our cynicism, and when we have strayed from the fold. God seeks us when we're hidden in darkness and shadow and it seems that the world has abandoned us. God seeks us when we cannot remember our faith or even that we were once faithful. God seeks us not in the confidence of certainty, but in depressions, in grey areas, in liminal spaces.

So if we want to encounter God, we mustn't barricade ourselves in a religious fortress or holy huddle. We can't distance ourselves from other people through smugness or self-righteousness or complacency. Instead, we must rattle about with other lost and vulnerable things: the lonely gloves, the odd socks, the broken umbrellas, the discarded people. Because we'll be found when we're among the waifs and strays and ratbags and rascals and even those who've somehow lost themselves, who nevertheless know to turn up at the party and enjoy a drink with Jesus.

Through the words of a stranger, the love of an enemy, the prayers of a friend, through the earthy goodness of bread, wine and water, through stories and parables and interpretations of scripture that set our hearts burning within us, God keeps inviting. Sometimes I imagine God as a Lebanese host who won't take no for an answer. Other times I imagine a persistent woman who goes by the name of Grace.

However God appears, we'll know we've been found when we're no longer parched or fearful or angry or resentful but instead have entered the goodness; we'll know we've been found when our thirst is quenched and the world erupts with joy.

'Can I offer you a drink?' Thank you, no. 'Surely you must be thirsty!' Really, I'm fine. 'My friends and neighbours are on their way, there's a bottle cooling, let's crack it open and celebrate!' Three invitations, a threefold beckoning into joy. How does the story end? Only you can tell. Ω