

LUKE 15:1-10  
EVERYONE MATTERS

There's a crowd; it's a noisy crowd, a tense and angry crowd, shouting, calling for action. At the centre of the crowd, the focus of their attention, is a young Christian preacher; his preaching has caused a stir and people are not happy, ready to shut him up if he doesn't stop. He is defending himself; he's telling the crowd what he thinks and why, but they're not impressed; they are not persuaded and are baying for blood. In the background, another young man is watching all that is going on; this other young man is holding the jackets, looking after the coats of those in the crowd who are all set for action; we are told that this other young man approves of what they are about to do. The young preacher is called Stephen and he is about to be stoned to death for his Christian preaching; the other young man standing watching is Saul of Tarsus; was this the first thread in his young life that would lead him to Christian faith and Christian ministry later on the road to Damascus? You can read the whole story in Acts chapters 6,7, and 9.

Years later, towards end of his life, the same Saul of Tarsus, now the apostle Paul is reflecting on his life and on the way in which God has loved him. "*Here is...*" (1 Timothy 1:15f) The "worst of sinners" – that's quite a statement; "surely not, Paul!" But he has already explained this self-assessment – "*Even though...*" (1 Timothy 1:13) The young man, Saul, at the back of the crowd, spent the next few years of his life persecuting the church, throwing Christians into prison and maybe even worse, trying to persuade them to renounce their faith. After his conversion and when he tried to begin Christian ministry, the church was naturally suspicious: "is this conversion genuine; can we trust this man or is he trying to fake his conversion to weasel his way into our churches so that he can persecute us even more?" You can understand! Did he really belong?

As an experienced church leader, a preacher, an apostle, Paul still had his critics. "He's not very impressive" some said; others pointed out that he had never been with Jesus and that he was not a witness of the resurrection as others had been. Some said that he was making far too grand claims for himself. His face didn't quite fit! But in writing to his young friend Timothy, Paul is clear that his life and ministry has been full of the grace and patience of God. For all that, for some people, Paul seemed not to fit in, or belong, he was convinced that he belonged to God; he was convinced that God loved him and was patient and gracious to him. He mattered; he belonged; God loved him, had saved him, and had graced him in Jesus.

Who belongs? It is a big question for churches! I was hearing a story the other day of a young couple who had gone to their local church last Sunday as they had the week before; it was all new to them! They are very troubled young people with addiction problems, abuse and brokenness. The minister said that he was glad for the opportunity to minister to them through worship and the word, but he was even more glad that people in the congregation took them home to lunch afterwards, neither of them having eaten that day. I'm not sure that every church would react like that to people in these circumstances, though I like to think we would. He ended the story by saying "they won't care what we know unless they know that we care." How many people are lost to the church now because at some point in their lives they were made to feel that they didn't belong? Maybe they never even got to hear a sermon, but were just made to feel that they don't belong; maybe nothing was said out loud, but we have a way of communicating without words that says to people "you're not welcome here!"

It was exactly the same debate that was taking place with Jesus in the prelude to the parables about being lost. It was this conversation that became the reason for these parables; the parables are the answer to that conversation. "*Now the...*" (Luke 15:1f) Some of that is a simple description of what is going on around Jesus, but some of it is criticism of Jesus' attitude to the people who are there. These are the "wrong kind of people" according to the Pharisees; Jesus shouldn't be wasting His time with these people, these "sinners". Some of these people

clearly didn't belong and Jesus should realise that and should make sure that He spent time with the right kind of people; these right kind of people would enhance His standing as a rabbi, and enhance His reputation; even the Pharisees might grow to love Him.

All kinds of people were drawn to Jesus, but not all of them led ordered lives. Tax-collectors were employed by the Romans, by the occupying army, on a kind of franchise scheme – “Jericho is your town, Zaccheus; raise £10,000 in taxes this year for us and you will be honoured” and so Zaccheus was despised by the people of Jericho because he was a collaborator with the enemy and because for the £10,000 he raised for the Romans, he made another £10,000 for himself, a greedy thief; people just don't like tax collectors! How do we describe the “sinners”? People who lived on the wrong side of the tracks, who made mistakes in life, who got things wrong, whose lives were morally questionable? It is not the first time this accusation has been made to Jesus: one of His disciples, Levi, or Matthew, was a tax collector and to celebrate his calling, Matthew invited his friends to meet Jesus and have dinner; Luke 15 is not the first time that Jesus is accused of spending time with, and eating with these people; the “tax collectors and sinners”, clearly the wrong sort! What for the Pharisees was an accusation, for Jesus to be described as the “friend of sinners” is exactly what he came to be! We must be glad for that!

Jesus tells three parables about what is “lost”; we read two of them. The shepherd has a hundred sheep; he is counting them into the fold at night and only has ninety-nine; one is missing. He could have declared himself content with ninety-nine, but no! Off he goes to look for the missing sheep, which is lost, has wandered off. He searches till he finds it and brings it home and has a party with his friends because he is so delighted to have found the lost sheep. A woman has ten coins: it is a lot of money for her if she is poor; some suggest they were not coins for spending but part of her wedding dress, and so were kept special; one is missing, and again she could have declared herself content with nine, but no! She sweeps out the house till she finds her tenth coin and has party with her friends. The third is the parable of lost son, told in the rest of chapter 15.

The point of parables is at the end of them: “*I tell you...*” (Luke 15:7, 10) God rejoices! These people who are despised and excluded, belong! They have come home; God is throwing a party because they have come to faith; God is overjoyed when these “sinners” have come to repentance, recognising that they are away from God and have turned to come home by faith. This is why Jesus came and God rejoices. The story of the prodigal son also ends with a party: dad throws a party because his son has come home: “*this brother...*” (Luke 15:32) Big brother objects to dad spending money on a party and food when this “waster” of a brother has spent half the inheritance, but that is not how dad sees it; dad is simply overjoyed that his son belongs at home again. Tax collectors and sinners belong; everyone belongs by their repentance and faith.

Somewhere to belong – how much does that matter? God is our home. For people who move around a lot in our society and have no sense of home or putting down roots, yet they need to know that they belong somewhere! For people who have made a mess of things in life, made the wrong choices, or dubious moral decisions, and who see life as a bit of a mess – they need to know that someone loves them. For people who have a very low opinion of themselves, perhaps because they have been told for years that they are useless, worthless, or don't belong anywhere, they long to be valued, they long for someone to throw them a party, though they are not sure they would go because they are not worthy! For people whose whole sense of the world has been thrown up in the air by life, whose whole sense of themselves has been challenged and thrown into chaos, they need to know that they are loved. People whose lives have been going along so smoothly, with no ripples to cause them any trouble at all, they too need to know that they belong to God by grace.

Everyone matters. No matter who comes through front door, no matter who asks you about faith, or church, no matter who wants to engage you in conversation, everyone matters to God. We matter; we are valued and loved by God; we belong. He throws a party when we come to repentance and faith and not just us. Paul had a deep sense of belonging; it came from the grace and patience of God; no matter what other people thought of him, that sense of being graced by God stayed with him for all of his life. Our sense of belonging comes from the same grace, the same patience of God in Jesus. We matter; God loves us; we belong!