

## **Reflection**

What a dramatic story. I remember following the events in the news as they unfolded, with the Bahraini government trying to get Hakeem extradited from Bangkok to Bahrain where he would have faced certain danger and even death. Hakeem's predicament was picked up by the media and became world news. The Australian government was using diplomatic channels to get him freed, but what really impressed me were the efforts of Craig Foster, the retired Socceroos captain.

Despite not knowing Hakeem, Craig made it his personal mission to campaign relentlessly to get him released. He dropped everything to fight this battle, he went in 'boots and all'. He contacted all his personal network: past players, current players, international captains, coaches, sports journalists, human rights advocates, politicians, podcasters, bloggers, community clubs and mobilised them to join the campaign to Save Hakeem. He travelled several times to Thailand to offer Hakeem support, and he also went to Geneva, Amsterdam and FIFA House in Zurich to advocate for the young man's freedom. 77 days after his arrest, Hakeem was finally released and allowed to fly back to Melbourne. A few weeks later, he became an Australian citizen.

I wonder, if Craig Foster had not taken up Hakeem's case, would it have been such a happy ending? We hear of Australians overseas being arrested and detained by various governments, sometimes for years on end. The Australian government does try to use diplomatic channels to help, but not always with any success. To me, what is really remarkable is that Craig Foster acted, not in any official capacity, not as a government representative, but as a private citizen. Despite not having ever met Hakeem, he took up his cause and did not give up until Hakeem was safely back on Australian soil.

I don't know about you, but at that time, I caught myself marvelling at the determination, the doggedness of Craig Foster. I wondered what motivated him, what drove him to go to such great lengths to free Hakeem, who was a stranger to him. I really believe that he did it all expecting no return, just out of the goodness of his heart. It is a kind of big-heartedness, a kind of altruism that it is hard to even imagine.

Let's just leave that story for the time being and turn to today's gospel reading. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin are the first two of a triptych which culminates in the story of the lost son or the prodigal son. We are meant to read the 3 parables together. Jesus told the parables to make a point. It was such an important point that he told, not

one, not 2, but 3 parables to illustrate this same point. So I guess, this should indicate to us that Jesus really, really wanted us to understand this point. So, what are these 3 parables all about?

First, the story of the lost sheep. You have a hundred sheep and one of them wanders off and gets lost. You leave the other ninety-nine to fend for themselves in the wilderness and you go after this one lost sheep. And when you find it, you are so happy! You lay it on your shoulders and bring it home, and when you get home, you are so overjoyed that you call together all your friends and neighbours to celebrate with you.

Let's think about this, one of your sheep goes astray and you leave the other ninety-nine to their own devices and go after the one lost sheep. Was that really sensible? Wouldn't it have been more sensible look after the 99 well-behaved sheep and just count the stray one as lost? But no, the shepherd is not a very pragmatic shepherd. He drops everything, goes after the lost one, finds it and comes home rejoicing. The happy ending to the lost sheep story is summed up by the following sentence: 'Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.'

So is this parable about sinners repenting? Was the shepherd really more joyous over the one naughty sheep, rather than the 99 righteous sheep that had no need of repentance? In what way did the naughty sheep 'repent'? It didn't change its mind about wandering off, it didn't turn around and come back to the flock. Did it even know it was lost? It was the shepherd who went after the sheep and brought it back. In any case, can a sheep, an animal 'repent' of its sin? We may have to think a bit more about this parable.

The next parable is the story of the lost coin. I always like this story because the main character is a woman. If you think these 3 parables are to illustrate something about God, then in this one, God is shown as a woman. The woman has 10 coins and one goes missing. Like the shepherd in the previous parable, the woman spares no effort to find the one lost coin: she lights a lamp, sweeps the whole house, searching in every corner until that lost coin is found. And like the shepherd who finds the lost sheep, the woman rejoices over the lost coin. And this parable ends with these words: 'Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

Again 'repentance'! Again, there is rejoicing over one sinner who repents. Are you convinced? How did the coin 'repent'? Can a coin (an inanimate object) 'repent'?

The third parable, which is not in today's reading, but which is well known to us is about a lost son, a son who goes astray. You might remember that once the son has spent all his money and is starving, he decides to return to his father's house because he knows that his father's servants are eating better than him. Is that 'repentance'? Is he remorseful about the way he has treated his father? Does he see the error of his ways?

Anyway, the prodigal decides to go home. But while he was still far off, and before he gets a chance to apologize to his father for his bad behaviour, the father runs to him, embraces him with joy and throws a party to celebrate. Was the prodigal son really sorry? Did he really repent of his actions? The story does not really dwell on this or make this clear. Unlike the first 2 parables, there is no summing up statement about there being more joy in heaven over a sinner who repents than a righteous one in no need of repentance.

Rather than dwelling on the son's 'repentance', what the story emphasises is the celebration, the joy that the father shows at recovering his lost son: the prodigal is given the finest robe, a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet, and a fatted calf killed for the feast. This is what the three parables *really* have in common: the great joy, the celebration when even one silly sheep or one little coin, or one wayward son is found.

Jesus tells these three parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son to illustrate the extravagance of God's love. It is a love that searches for the lost until they are found. It is a love that does not ask whether the lost one is deserving, whether they are responsible for their own predicament. It is a love that does not count the cost of recovering the lost. It is a love that is not really dependant on 'repentance' at all, but on God's absolute commitment to finding the lost one.

I think this point is also alluded to in the New Testament reading. Paul gives thanks that Jesus has called him into his service even though he (Paul) 'was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.' If you know the story of Paul, before his Damascus Road experience and his conversion to Christianity, Paul was a persecutor of Christians and very zealous for their destruction. Paul acknowledges his past and

says this: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.' Paul was another one who was 'lost', but it was not his own repentance that saved him but God's seeking him out, zapping him on the Damascus Road and pouring out his grace on him.

As in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, Paul's story is one where God is the one who initiates. Until his Damascus Road experience, I doubt if Paul even thought of himself as lost or in need of repentance. Blasphemer that he was, persecutor of Christians that he was, God sought him out and turned his life around.

To return to the story of Hakeem al- Araibi, I think there is no doubt he did know that he was 'lost', in terrible danger, in need of rescue. He knew that if he was extradited to Bahrain, he would face unjust detention, torture and probably death. But along came Craig Foster who championed his cause, who never relented until Hakeem was freed and returned home.

I doubt if anyone of us has ever faced quite such a dire situation, where we were totally lost and in desperate need of rescue, where everything was beyond our control. But if we were ever to find ourselves in such a situation, if we were ever so lost and desperate, wouldn't we have wanted someone like Craig Foster on our side, doing everything possible to save us, never counting the cost, never giving up, until we have been saved?

Well, I think, in today's parables, Jesus shows us that God heart is just like that. God seeks us and doesn't give up until we are found. And then, God rejoices over us. Because that is the nature of divine love. Each one of us, even the silliest sheep, even the smallest coin, even the most rebellious son, is of immeasurable worth to God. Even when we were lost, God loved us, has always loved us, will always love us. It is this that Jesus wants us to understand, so much so that he told 3 parables to illustrate the point: the profound love of God for every single one of us.

In our world today, there are lost ones everywhere: in countries ravaged by war or stricken by natural disaster, or where the whole economy has collapsed. There are lost ones in prisons, in slums, in refugee camps, in remote Aboriginal communities, and even in our very neighbourhoods, behind closed doors, there are the lost. Each one of these lost ones is precious to God, and when even one of them is found, there is much rejoicing in heaven.

'Amazing Grace' is one of the most well-known hymns, often played at funerals, even when people are not particularly religious. In the words of the hymn: 'I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.' It is not we who have found God, but God who has found us. And we who have been found by God, we who have experienced the extravagant love of God, may we find it in our hearts to continually seek out the lost. May we search them out, may we not give up until they are found. And when they are found, may we join God and the angels in the celebration.

I would like to end today by offering you the words of the Henri Nouwen, one of the most influential spiritual thinkers of the last century. From his book The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming: 'Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me and to love me. The question is not, "How am I to find God?" but "How am I to let myself be found by God?" The question is not how am I to know God?" but "How am I to let myself be known by God?" And, finally, the question is not "How am I to love God?" but "How am I to let myself be loved by God?"