

## Wednesday 10 August 2016 St Peter's Upper Riccarton

### Lost and Found

*Luke 15: 1-7*

Have you ever been lost?

John and I once cooked for a residential Counsellor Training weekend at a lodge on the lower slopes of Mt Pirongia in the Waikato. On the Saturday afternoon we went for a walk up a nearby track.

It's started out as a road, but it soon narrowed to a steep, single person path. I followed closely behind John, head down, watching for tree roots and boulders on the path.

After about an hour we emerged into a clearing where there was a seat, and we stopped to rest. It was a beautiful summer's day and we could see out across the valley.

I felt I'd come far enough, but John was keen to press on up the path to the summit. We agreed that I would head back down, and start preparing the evening meal.

I set off back down the track, but after a short time I came to a sudden stop, because the track seemed to have disappeared! I wasn't too concerned, and decided I would go back to the clearing

and wait for John. We hadn't seen anyone else on the track that day.

I sat in the sun, enjoying the view and the birdsong and almost dozed off. Then I realised that it must be getting late. I'd forgotten to wear my watch but as the sun moved lower I began to feel a bit cold, since I was wearing thin summer clothing.

There was no sign of John and I started to panic –

I shouted out loudly to him several times but heard only an echo.

I started to imagine him having fallen, and decided that I must set off again. As I walked I was praying, and to calm my fear I started singing my favourite hymns out loud.

Again I came to the place where I'd lost the track and still couldn't see the way ahead, but this time I felt sure I would find it somehow. I took a few steps forward, off the track – something we were always taught you should never do in the bush – and then I saw it again, just in front of me!

Apparently a fallen tree had blocked the track so it now took a hairpin detour, which I'd missed!

You can imagine my joy at being back on the path again. My singing changed to hymns of triumph!

Near the entrance to the track I was met by John, accompanied by a group of park rangers.

He assured me he hadn't been worried, but his enormous grin matched my own as we hugged each other, before returning to the lodge.

Later, as we shared our stories he told me that, further up the mountain from the clearing, the track branched so he decided to take a different path back.

When he returned to the lodge, he was very surprised to discover I wasn't there, and after waiting awhile, he alerted the ranger and they started their search.

I suppose I wasn't really lost, but it certainly felt like it. Even after all these years I can still recall my fear and panic at that moment in the clearing, when I called out and got no answer.

However, even more strongly, I can remember the joy of having found my way again!

10 years later, when I went to my first parish - Te Awamutu- Pirongia - I saw Mt Pirongia every day and came to love it.

It became a very important symbol to me as I '*lifted up my eyes to the hills*', and now I have it embroidered on my stole!

Looking back over my life to the time when I was 'found' by Jesus Christ at the time of my conversion, I realise that I had actually been lost then as well, but didn't know it until I knew the joy of being found!

We don't have to find ourselves alone on the side of a mountain to be lost.

Being lost may mean having no sense of direction: living from day to day, without any real

conversion, I realise that I had actually been lost then as well, but didn't know it until I knew the joy of being found!

We don't have to find ourselves alone on the side of a mountain to be lost.

Being lost may mean having no sense of direction; living from day to day, without any real sense of purpose. It may mean having no awareness of support from those close to us; or having no defence against the onslaughts life may hurl against us.

Feeling lost, in unfamiliar territory, is part of being human, as well as being at the heart of today's parable.

This parable is one of those stories that seem very simple, until you read it carefully. Then suddenly it's not as simple as you thought.

There's an old gospel hymn that goes:

*"There were ninety and nine that safely lay in the shelter of the fold.*

*But one was out on the hills away, Far off from the gates of gold."*

It's a great hymn, but it's not quite how Jesus told it because these sheep are not safely in the sheepfold. They've been abandoned in the wilderness.

So I wonder who is lost in this story?

Is it the single sheep nibbling along head-down, until it suddenly realises it can't see or hear the others, and nobody responds to its cry for help?

Or is it the other sheep who suddenly find themselves out in the wilderness without their shepherd? Because while the shepherd is charging across the countryside, desperate to find that little lost sheep, out there, on a hillside in the wilderness, are ninety nine other sheep, wondering what's happened to their shepherd!

*"It's getting very dark out here! When did he say he'd be back?"*

*Does anybody know what's going on?*

*Was that a wolf howl I just heard?"*

I wonder: *"Who am I in the story? Who are you in the story?"*

Am I that treasured sheep worth dying for, or am I one of the ninety nine left behind - grumpy, resentful, frightened?

Or am I even that shepherd, searching and searching, until what was lost is found, then celebrating? I expect most of us have played every role in this story at one time or another.

But maybe, some of the times I've thought I was found, were actually times when I was really lost; and the times I thought I was lost, God knew where I was all the time.

And the times I was celebrating how great it is to be safely here in the sheepfold were actually the times I should have been out on the hillsides, searching.

As we make our stumbling way through life, we can easily lose track of who we are, finding ourselves in the wrong place at the wrong time; becoming lost through our life circumstances.

But God never gives up on us until he's found us, and our experiences of being found reveal to us a glimpse of the wonder of God's love for us.

A final tale:

When the first missionaries to the Inuit, Eskimo, people attempted to translate the Bible they stumbled over the word, 'joy'.

In that bleak, icy landscape there wasn't much call for such a word, until someone pointed out that the Inuit' peoples' dogs were always full of joy at the end of a hard day of sledge pulling. So the verse is apparently, translated, *'there will be more tail wagging in heaven over one sinner that repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance!'*

Amen.

*Rev Marcia Hardy*