



## Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,  
open our hearts, ready our minds  
and fire our imaginations,  
so that as we gather together before you,  
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,  
we might discover more of your goodness,  
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit  
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us  
on our journey into fullness of life.

**Amen**

## 'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Have you ever lost something deeply precious to you? What lengths did you go to in order to find it?

## Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of welcome, you ate with those others ignored.

**Thanks be to God!**

God of risk, you leave the ninety-nine to seek the lost.

**Thanks be to God!**

God of hope, you never give up on searching for us.

**Thanks be to God!**

God of justice, you break down the barriers that exclude.

**Thanks be to God!**

God of rejoicing, you celebrate when we're restored.

**Thanks be to God!**

God of love, in Jesus Christ you make all things new.

**Thanks be to God! Amen**

## Prayers of Renewal

God of hospitality and welcome,  
you welcome all who would come to your table,  
reach out to those who others leave out,  
and challenge us to put your justice into action.  
Let us therefore bring to God those things in need of renewal:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:

**Restore us and heal us.**

We bring to you the times we've failed to love one another:

**Restore us and heal us.**

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:

**Restore us and heal us.**

We bring to you the injustices and oppression in our world:

**Restore us and heal us.**

We bring to you the failings and disunity of your Church:

**Restore us and heal us.**

God of hospitality and welcome,  
you love us just as we are,  
but too much to leave us where we are.  
Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,  
and breathe new life into us. **Amen**

**Reading** Luke 15:1 – 10

### **Sermon**

I first started needing to wear glasses in my mid-twenties, I suppose because of the number of hours that I'd spent staring at a computer screen as a student, then at work. Technically, I do not need to wear them all the time, as I only need them for reading. However, as you never know when you will need to read something, and because I'm sometimes quite forgetful, I decided early on that I would wear them all the time. Hopefully, it means I'll minimise the occasions on which I'll lose my glasses, and need to search for them. When I was seven or thereabouts, my Mum lost her glasses one evening. After looking everywhere she could think of, my brother and I were called on, and between the three of us, we searched for the lost glasses for around half an hour. We finally stopped when my brother realised that she'd been wearing them all the time! The next day, Mum went to see the opticians, and got some stronger lenses...

When we've lost something important to us, it is a really unpleasant experience, and it can be hard not to panic when we've looked high and low without success. Today's Bible reading offers up two stories told by Jesus, in which their protagonists go to extraordinary lengths to recover something 'lost'. They form two of a set of three parables, the third of which is the tale of the Prodigal Son. These were told in response to grumbling coming from the Pharisees and Scribes over the company Jesus kept. Now, we can't be certain about what Luke meant by using the term 'sinners' to describe the folk Jesus ate with; it's one of those things which scholars continue to argue about. We do know that the tax collectors worked on behalf of either Herod, or Pontius Pilate, neither of whom were exactly popular. They also had a bad reputation due to adding 'something extra' on to people's bills, and pocketing it for themselves. It seems pretty likely, therefore, that Jesus's dinner guests were something of a motley group, who might

indeed fit the bill of 'lost' people, from some perspectives. It is worth keeping in mind, though, that 'sin' was understood in Jewish culture to be more about 'fractured relationships' than 'immoral behaviour'.

So, what are we to make of the parables themselves? Well, friends, sometimes, I reckon we miss the humour in the Scriptures. Perhaps this happens because we're concerned about treating them with the seriousness they deserve, but I do wonder if our approach too easily stifles them, rather than truly bringing them to life. I've no doubt that Jesus had a fine sense of humour, and he frequently used it to make his point. These two parables, captured uniquely by Luke, are great examples of using comic exaggeration to 'drive home' the message. In the first story, one shepherd is looking after a substantial flock of a hundred sheep when, somehow, one of them goes missing. They promptly abandon the ninety-nine, something no real-life shepherds would be keen to do given the chaos which would likely reign in their absence! They search for the lost sheep, until they find it again, then proceed to throw a spectacular party – we might imagine many 'lost sheep' would need rounding up after all that! Yet, Jesus tells us this reflects the sheer joy of God when a lost person returns to the fold...

Turning to the second parable, we find a woman with ten silver coins who notices that one of these has gone missing. I gather that, in the Syrian context from which it's likely Luke's Gospel stems, the house would've been made of a heavy stone that meant that windows and the like were avoided, in order for the buildings to be strong enough to support any upper floors. That explains why the home would have been dark, and required sweeping in order to find this lost coin. The Greek word used for 'coin' here means a denarius, which was worth about a day's wages for a labourer. However, her celebration would probably have cost far more if all of her friends and neighbours were invited! Again, we have a wonderfully 'over the top' response, which illustrates the extravagant nature of God's love.

Yet, as Jane Williams identifies in her perceptive commentary, while we have two parables pointing to joyful reconciliation between God, and those who are lost in some way, we don't actually hear anything about the reaction of the various party guests to these calls to come and celebrate. Do they share in the joy? Are they embarrassed? I'm pretty sure that our neighbours would have thought we'd gone mad, if we'd thrown a party because my mum's 'lost' glasses were found! It's likely the Pharisees and Scribes picked up on this uncomfortable subtext, which comes through clearly in the negative reaction of the older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son. How do we react when faced with the outrageous, extravagant love of God in practice? Put simply, would we embrace it, or would we have been amongst those people in the crowds shouting 'crucify!' on Good Friday, when Jesus refused to stop turning the world upside down, by loving all comers? Those in charge had very definite ideas about who was 'in' and 'out' in the family of God. This also had a profoundly nationalistic flavour, within a society where religion and politics were 'bound up'. If 'Make Israel great again!' had been proclaimed, then the type of company Jesus kept wouldn't have been part of the picture...

That thought brings me to the implications of our parables for today. Friends, you don't need me to remind you that the backdrop against which we meet is one of uncertainty and division. Ours has become a deeply polarised nation in the face of the ongoing serious practical problems around. Yet, these are parables of reconciliation, in which relationships are mended between humanity and God, and Jesus's hearers were challenged about their self-righteous judgment toward the people he ate with. It's tempting to retreat in to 'echo chambers', whether either online or offline, in which we surround ourselves with people who – broadly speaking – agree with us. However, whatever the eventual outcomes of this current national tumult, one of the few things that seems clear is that there is a desperate need for building bridges across divides, caused by educational background, wealth,

culture, religion and politics. That's not easy within a deeply unequal society such as ours, where economic segregation is a real problem and impacts so much of everyday life. However, it seems to me that God rejoices as extravagantly when 'lost' relationships are restored, as when 'lost' people find their home in God, through Jesus Christ.

Now, it goes without saying that all this is costly and difficult. It might not always be achievable in practice. However, if we embrace God's extravagant love, even when it seems ridiculous to those around us and takes us massively out of our 'comfort zones', then this is surely a part of what discipleship looks like within our current context. May we be people, therefore, who build bridges rather than walls, as our God rejoices when that which was lost is found. Amen

### **Recommended Resource of the Week**

Amy-Jill Levine's 2015 book *Short Stories by Jesus* explores Jesus' parables, looking at interpretations then and now.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

#### **Lord's Prayer**

#### **Blessing**