



Wanting to be found

Some of you will know that before I came to be Rector here, I was a Canon at St Paul's Cathedral. And on Thursday this week, I went back there to see one of the projects I was involved in there a long time ago, come to fruition. St Paul's was the first UK Cathedral to commission video art as a permanent installation. Bill Viola, after being commissioned 13 years ago has made two installations which are now on permanent loan to St Paul's from The Tate. On the south side, there is one entitled Modern Martyrs: Earth, Air, Fire, Water. And on the north side, the new piece which opened on Thursday; Mary.

Part of the process of commissioning him was that a couple of us who were priests spent the day with the artist and his collaborators discussing Mary. Bill Viola has an interest in Christian mysticism, Sufism, Buddhism; and he admitted too that the iconography of Christian Renaissance art had made its mark with him: the familiar pictures of Mary dressed in blue looking, some might say, a bit limp. We discussed the fact that Mary had been lost to the tradition in some ways, her power cauterised, her meaning diluted, by centuries of either extravagant devotion or on the other hand protesters against that devotion which led to a "Protestant" ignoring of her pivotal role. We wanted to take a different tack; taking seriously the rich heritage of legends about Mary while at the same time not simply locking her up in her familiar clothes and stance. We discussed the fact that of all the characters around Jesus, Mary is the most often portrayed as black; that her theological meaning as the one who bears God in the world, the container of the uncontainable, gives her an energetic and contemporary power in a still patriarchal Christian orthodoxy. It was an amazing day, a

privilege spending it with someone who had such a creative spirit – and being in conversation with him and was a day that stands out for me in my memory.

And so it was equally amazing, because now 13 years have passed, years of development and discussion, to see what he's come up with. A 13 minute film, which shows Mary variously in ruined cities, in wilderness surrounded by burnt vegetation and carcasses, in lush green meadows meeting Elizabeth. But perhaps the most striking is the beginning. A woman, black and beautiful, with close cropped hair sits tall, staring out at you the viewer. Behind her is the city scape of Los Angeles; with all its symbols of wealth, power, pollution and busyness. She is naked from the waist up, and is breast feeding her child. Mary is herself both fearless and vulnerable, feeding from herself, in front of us, the child who would grow up to heal and teach and save.

The gospel that we are reading all this year week by week has been the gospel of Luke. In turn, each year, one gospel is the main source for our Sunday readings. And Luke, you could say, is Mary's gospel. It's in Luke's gospel that Mary has the most to say and from where our stories about her come.

It's in Luke's gospel that most women appear. Often, stories about a man are paired with stories about a woman as in today's gospel. And Jesus in Luke, with his emphasis on the poor, with his strong healing ministry and concern for justice, reveals himself to be his mother's son; following Mary's revolutionary cry in the Magnificat that the mighty have been put down, that the hungry are fed, that the rich have been sent empty away.

And today's gospel is no exception. I can always hear Mary behind Jesus in Luke's gospel: and maybe some of his childhood experiences cause him to say to the crowd as he's constantly searching for creative and understandable ways to tell them more about God and what God's like – well, you know, what woman, having lost a coin, will not sweep the house and keep sweeping until she finds it? She will be persistent until she finds it – and then she'll call her neighbours together to celebrate with her. I tell you – there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous people. I guess he will have seen Mary do that perhaps time and time again; and as ever, Jesus is inventive, curious, in transforming everyday experiences into stories that teach us about God.

And the central teaching of these stories is deeply mysterious. In this bit of Luke's gospel, Luke has put together three stories that he has heard Jesus tell – and he thinks they have a similar theme. So first we get the shepherd leaving the 99 sheep and going and finding the one who's lost. Then we get the woman searching for the coin and finding it. Then the story immediately after this, not in today's gospel, is the story of the son who takes his inheritance, wastes it, then eventually comes home and his father throws a party and his older brother is cross: the story we know often as the prodigal son.

One other distinctive aspect of Luke's gospel; In Luke, when he writes about a crowd "hearing" or repeats Jesus's very often repeated "listen", he's talking about more than hearing the words. "Hearing" for Luke means reflecting on what has been said, taking it to heart, responding with repentance and change. And Jesus isn't speaking in a vacuum; his stories are always told to people in a particular context and very often in reaction to something – a question, a worry, a challenge.

Here the context is striking because he's telling the stories in reaction to what Luke tells us is "grumbling".

Jesus here is responding to "grumbling" – complaining- *diegogguzon* – by Pharisees. He tells three parables about an animal, a coin, a person. Each story deals with what we know life is like: the pain of losing, the joy of finding. Or is it always that simple?

I don't know if you ever played hide and seek as a child. Whenever I did, to be honest, I didn't like it much; I remember even today the emotions I felt; a kind of giddy fear as I set off usually around an unfamiliar house trying to find somewhere to hide. Trying to guess the time it was taking the counter to count, and then squeezing myself under a bed or behind a piece of furniture, with a feeling of dread, listening for footsteps on the stairs.

What has often struck me is that the assumption of these gospel stories and of this teaching is that it is somehow bad to be lost and good to be found. And I suppose in the grand scheme of things, it is. But this searching God – in the person of the working shepherd, the woman in the house or the father who has lost his child, is God who may, if I stop to think about it, cause me alarm alongside the more familiar comfort. Because God is a lot safer kept at a distance. And half the time I'm not at all sure I want to be found. Like a child hiding in a cupboard, wanting to be found is complex, and involves loss and change as well as relief or joy. What's more, being found by God, teaches Jesus, is closely linked to something called repentance: in Greek *metanoia*; change of life – an about turn, profound transformation. And that's not necessarily a comfortable thing to contemplate either.

I love the grumbling and the complaining that sets the context for this story, because it's so recognisable.

Repentance looks like it's good – we're supposed to think it is - and the gospels are full of calls to change our ways. But in reality, when we come up against it, we can often find ourselves "grumbling". We can feel resentment when we see someone else making a decision to change that challenges our decision not to. A friend of mine last year lost a lot of weight. Because she lives overseas, I hadn't seen the gradual change; I saw it all at once when she arrived. She looked amazing – and as we celebrated her iron will (I tried to stuff her full of crisps but she wasn't having it), she admitted that some of her friends had really struggled with her losing the weight she had. Although they said they were glad for her, they were secretly quite resentful that she'd done this – because while she was bigger than them, they felt better about themselves. She hadn't anticipated this; her change of life had challenged some of her friends deeply, despite themselves.

The writer of our first reading, Saul of Tarsus, faced just the same thing when he moved, quite dramatically, from being a person who persecuted Christians, who pursued them and attacked them, to being Paul, one of them. His conversion was simply not believed.

But the rather beautiful teaching that Jesus draws from his stories is that repentance and finding, change and transformation is celebrated in heaven even if some people grumble against it on earth. There are, to quote the Pentecostal preacher Debra Washington *"angels in heaven doing high fives at the very mention of your name"*.

These stories aren't about sheep or money. Like all good stories, they are emotional tales that teach us about ourselves and help us reflect on the deepest themes of our life and faith.

In meditating on the fundamental themes of losing and finding, Jesus introduces us to the startling idea that God can miss you; that

there is a capacity in God to miss you – to notice you're gone - to yearn for you – and then to search for you.

The Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1930s, Cosmo Gordon Lang, was known for his humane preaching; and his take on this story was that our lostness comes when we have, as we all do from time to time, *"the sense that after all, our life stands apart, its burden of sin or sorrow or longing unknown and unshared by others"*. It is at this very moment that these stories tell us that we are missed by God. *Cosmo Gordon Lang The Parables of Jesus p269*

The God that Jesus is describing is a God who "goes after" the ones who are lost; this is not a cool headed – well probably God might exist and I will kind of carry on making my own choices and we'll have a kind of tolerant peaceful co-existence. No, Jesus challenges that kind of picture of God. This is God who is restless without you; who looks for the slightest hint that you want to be whole, the slightest breeze of wanting to return home – and will come running.

I was speaking to someone who works around here and who is over working, and worried about money and the mortgage. He said he has a recurring fantasy when the stress gets too much that someone in a white coat will knock on the door of his office tell him that he doesn't have to do this anymore and that they have come to take him away for a rest. This office worker reminds me of the last line in Jesus's story – it's his version of the shepherd who finds the one who is lost, throws the sheep on his shoulders and carries me home.

In many of his stories, parables, encounters with strangers, Jesus closely identifies with the pain of ones who feel themselves to be lost: on the cross Jesus cried *My God why have you forsaken me?* And today is the last Sunday that we will see Jesus absent from our east window. As part of our marking of the

United Nations International Day of the Disappeared, we know that this dereliction and lostness are part of the presence of God in the world. One of the themes we have been exploring in the Day of the Disappeared events is the theme of ambiguous loss; when families have been separated running in opposite directions on a beach, escaping violence in a village. And today on the 15th anniversary of 9/11, the sequence of wars and terrorism set in train 15 years ago has meant many families from every nation on earth have experienced this trauma and do so today. Ambiguous loss means that people are separated but they have no idea if their loved ones are alive or dead. Ambiguous loss. An appalling unresolved pain.

I think that these gospel stories today can also raise in us reflections on ambiguous finding. In a spiritual sense; do you want to be found by God? There is huge rejoicing in heaven with those high fiving angels when you are

found – and found over and over again – for this doesn't just happen once but all the time. But on earth, we're often caught up in the fear of being found or the grumbling when we think we've witnessed it in someone else. The metanoia, repentance, transformation that being found triggers might make the prospect more ambiguous than we think it should be. Because what is opened up is a whole other world of alternative futures for you, for this church, for our society. And so acknowledging these truths will change our prayers and make them more truthful, cultivating hopefully an ever deeper and deepening trust in God.

Jesus's stories today are not about sheep or money: they are about the awesome possibility that God misses you, searches for you and can't wait for you to be found. Amen.

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