

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

I once was lost but now I'm found

Presented by Richard Quadrio

Introduction

It's funny what you remember from childhood. I remember that day I went shopping with my gran – I think I was only about three years of age. I got distracted and found myself wandering out the back of a shop and out into the lane behind. Then I remember looking for my gran and I could not find her.

I don't remember what happened next but my next memory was being driven home in the police car. I must have given my parents and grandmother a real fright. I was lost – and then I was found.

This morning I want us to explore what it means to be lost spiritually and how God is mounting an all-out rescue mission for every lost soul. God does care for the lost so much that he sent his son Jesus to mount a costly rescue mission. As John Newton put it in *Amazing Grace*, "I once was lost but now am found – was blind but now I see"

Part One

People are lost and need to be found. It is a sad fact of life that when it comes to God people are lost and need to be found. Have you ever had the experience of thinking about reading a particular book, but you were daunted by the size or reputation and you just could not get the courage to attempt the read?

For me there have been many books like that, and to be honest, still a few that seem beyond me. But sometimes you attempt a big book and get a surprise. I remember reading Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, which I thought would be a long and painful story. In fact it is one of the most accessible, readable and inspiring books I have ever read. It is sad but it is also a thriller, which enchants the reader with hope in spite of incredible suffering.

Likewise I recently read Jeffery Sach's paperback, *Make Poverty History*, which I thought would be idealistic and dull. But instead I discovered a book that inspires you to believe that extreme poverty is not inevitable and things can change.

For many people the Bible remains a huge book that is well beyond them. And yet when people actually start reading the Bible they normally get a surprise. If you are a little daunted by the Bible, then can I recommend that you just start with a very small chunk. There is a book in the New Testament called Luke. It is the story of the life of Jesus, as assembled by a careful physician, Luke, who wanted to tell the story of Jesus' amazing life. And if even this seems too hard, then why not just start with one chapter – Luke chapter 15.

In Luke 15 Jesus recounts three simple stories to explain how God feels about irreligious people. If you read the stories you will find that actually God could not give a hoot about religion. No, relationships are the key to the way God views us, and these stories tell us that quite simply, without God we are lost. But what is

exciting is that God is actually looking for us. And most exciting of all, is that the three stories remind us that God is so pleased when we come back to him, that he is even prepared to celebrate with a party.

What a thought - the God of creation and the whole universe cares so much for you, that He is prepared to throw a party in your honour if only you will stop running and turn back to Him.

“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” Luke 15:7

Part 2

It is a sad fact that many people are lost to God and are looking in the wrong direction. I heard a story on the radio recently, which was silly, sad and a little frightening. Somewhere in Europe there is a very unhappy and rather mixed up black swan. This swan lived on a lake and I guess up until recently had led a pretty average swan-like existence. However in recent days this particular swan, it seems, has fallen in love.

Now it's not easy to detect whether a swan is in love, but this swan's tell-tale signs made it obvious that love had captured its heart. For the last two weeks this swan has not left the side of another. It seems a deep attachment had developed, and the swan simply could not leave the side of the one for whom it was declaring unswerving loyalty, devotion and love.

There is only one problem with this story and that is that the object of the swan's love is not actually a swan. No, it appears that the swan has fallen for a man-made recreational paddleboat painted black and in the shape of a rather giant swan. The swan's devotion is touching, but in the light of the fact that the paddleboat is unlikely to show much interest, the swan is indeed on the way to a broken heart, at the very least. Swans were actually designed to love and mate with swans. No one can question the swan's devotion, but when misplaced this devotion is at the very least a waste of time, and downright dangerous at worst.

While we can laugh at this silly animal, we can also see a reflection that is a little frightening. Consider for a moment this clear warning in the Old Book:

“They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator — who is forever praised. Amen.” Romans 1: 25

The Bible is consistent in its warning that when we worship, when we act with undying devotion, indeed when we love the wrong thing, we take a terrible risk. To ignore the Creator and Sustainer of all things and to worship the creation can make us as foolish and lost as the poor swan in love with a paddleboat.

CS Lewis, the great writer, once said that you could tell the quality of a man by what he loved. When God is our heart's desire and devotion, we are living to our highest calling. Worship of the true and living God lifts our minds from fruitless existence and points us in a heavenly direction. Lives of devotion and love, a passion for hurting people, and a calling to beauty and grace, so often flow from hearts devoted to the Creator God.

When fellow humans are treasured and loved we are blessed beyond measure. But when things made of stone, wood, metal, glass and plastic become the centre of our devotion, we are left with something that is sterile and, quite frankly, a little sad. When we are lost we need to look in the right direction.

Part 3

It is sad that many are lost - and many are looking in the wrong direction. When we are lost its great to find a good one who will rescue us!

Like many, I grew up as a child believing that in general terms, there were two sorts of people in the world: there were good people who were, for want of a better description, like 'us'; and there were bad people, best described as 'them'. I played rugby for Epping and basically we were good, and our fiercest opponents were Beecroft, who basically were bad. Likewise I went to Epping Boys High School and we were basically good, and our fierce competitors were James Ruse Agricultural High, who were basically nasty, horrible and even worse, they knew how to look after cows. It's a simple and clear way of seeing the world: goodies like us and baddies like them.

You would think that people would grow out of such a foolish view of the world, but if you pick up a newspaper, especially a tabloid, you will soon discover that our world still likes to think in these two categories. For example, if you are criminal or sex offender you are obviously bad. Business tycoons are normally really good, but the odd one is actually really bad in spite of good appearances. Most Australians are not racist, so we are told, but scratch a little deeper and you will find that many people fear there are quite a few bad races. Recent race riots in Sydney suggest that foolishly, there are a lot of people who still think that there are good races like 'us' and bad races like 'them'.

In old movies it was clear who were the good guys and who were the bad guys. Thankfully many modern movies and TV shows have begun to blur the line. In the TV series, *West Wing*, the President and his staff are clearly the good guys, but increasingly they do not do good things and sometimes they even do downright horrible things.

The Bible knows nothing of the good guy versus bad guy picture of the world. Rather, next to the standard of a perfect God, we are all shown to be imperfect. Our motives are never as pure as we imagine and our actions and thoughts are often unmentionable. The evil that we all recoil from in the world, is sadly present in each of our hearts.

Jesus calls us to face our own sin and seek God for forgiveness and renewal. Good people don't think they need God, but since there aren't any truly good people, we all need to face our Maker and accept that thankfully, He also offers to be our Saviour. *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* (Romans 5:8)

Conclusions

There is no doubt that Jesus is looking for people who are spiritually lost. Is that how you feel today? God knows our heart – our journey and our place. And when we are lost – we need one to help guide us home. Reach out to God in the person of Jesus, for already he is reaching out to you.

Lord God, we thank you that in the person of Jesus you are searching for lost people. Help us all today God to respond to your search. To put our hand up and say, Lord, here I am – please rescue me. Help us to be thankful. Help us to turn back to you and begin again. Amen.