

Hymns: **449** “Lord of all creation, to you be all praise”
 436 “What shall I do my God to love?”
 345 “**And can it be that I should gain?**”

Readings: **1 Timothy 1:12-17**
 Luke 15:1-10

“INEXHAUSTIBLE PATIENCE”

I’ve been walking in our Memorial Garden – the place where the last remains of a number of people dear to us have been buried or scattered. It’s a peaceful place and I love wandering there at my leisure. This morning, I went with a particular objective in view. I wanted to look at the plaque of Shirley Reiter. She was a dear friend born in 1920 who died in 2012. The little inscription on the plaque couldn’t be simpler: “a lovely Jewish Methodist”. Here lie her ashes. May she be forever at peace.

Fifteen years ago today (September 11 2001), Shirley was at work. Aged over 80, she worked in a lawyer’s office in Manhattan. Perched high in one of that city’s skyscrapers, she watched those planes fly past her window that fateful day before crashing into that nearby Twin Towers. It was the day the world changed.

Shirley was obliged to evacuate the building without using the lifts – she trudged down 52 flights of stairs – not bad for an octogenarian. And then she pitched into the chaos outside. She lived with her daughter, our lovely friend Fran, and she headed for home. There was panic on all hands. Unknown to her then (the truth has only lately come out), she was breathing in what one newspaper called “a toxic pall”. The air she inhaled contained particles of asbestos, powdered cement, glass dust, heavy metals, fuels and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). The intrepid Shirley just kept going, one step at a time, on the road that led her home.

Her daughter Fran, meanwhile, former deputy mayor of New York, was going frantic with worry about her mum. She raced around the city looking for her. The police (she’d once had political oversight of the NYPD) were glad to help. But to no avail. Fran went home. She couldn’t settle. A couple of hours later, her nerves in pieces, there was a loud knock on the door. Fearing the worst, Fran opened the door only to see Shirley covered with white dust, a walking snowwoman, standing there pleading to come in.

What was lost had been found. What relief! What joy! What an experience!

The stories in this morning’s Gospel passage strike a chord across the ages and continents. They seem to tap into a primordial human reflex, a response to finding something precious which was thought to be lost, a universal human experience. There’s little need to spell out the obvious. The joy is palpable. It’s universal. It’s the same across time and space. We’ve all felt it.

But I don't want to focus primarily on the end point of these stories. I want to look more carefully at the process, the search, the painstaking, cushion-turning, boringly and infuriatingly repetitive hunt for what has been lost. What stops do we pull out? What lengths do we go to? What mounting anxiety must we manage?

We know these things. Every one of us has experienced them. We've been there, done that, got the tee-shirt. The astonishing thing is, as we heard in this morning's epistle, God's done it too. He's hunted and searched, he's left no stone unturned, he's gone out of his way, he's put up with our ignorance and stupidity (reasons for getting lost), and with our wilfulness and stubbornness. All this without giving up. He has displayed an inexhaustible patience in his search for the lowest, the least, the last, the lost. And when he finds them, he brings them home. That's what happened to Paul. No wonder he describes the mercy and the grace, the faith and the love of such a God. In a different age, he might have sung one of our old choruses:

*I was lost and Jesus found me,
Found the sheep that went astray;
Raised me up and gently led me
Back into the narrow way.*

Yes' God's inexhaustible patience seems to know no end. And it should inspire and goad and challenge all of us to show rather more patience ourselves. Especially when dealing with the lost. Just think of it – there's lost love, lost causes, lost ideals, lost lovers.

Last night, Margaret and I watched the culmination of this season is promenade concerts. We saw our beloved Lorraine Davis present in the very middle of the floor beaming with pleasure exuding joy by the bucketful. Yet we were both in tears. On this most British of occasions, we noticed all the flags – from dozens of nations. And the singing of "Rule Britannia" had been entrusted to a Peruvian – a magnificent tenor. There was a massive rendering of William Blake's "Jerusalem" and Edward Elgar's "Land of Hope and Glory". Britain at its most inclusive best!

Shakespeare was there too. We heard Vaughn Williams's homage to Sir Henry Wood – a musical setting of words from the final act of "The Merchant of Venice". I was very moved by that.

Let me tell you why. Lorenzo refers to the "harmony... in immortal souls" – the sense of oneness and peace that exists fundamentally in each one of us. But he adds this laconic thought:

*But whilst the muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it."*

So humanity has lost touch with its inner harmony. The messiness and muddledness of everyday life has buried it deep down within us. It's got lost. So can it be found again? Can it be recovered. The old, old question at the heart of this morning's scripture readings.

Our lives drive and draw us into gross and grisly acts. And Shakespeare (in the words of Lorenzo) puts it like this:

*But music for the time doth change our nature;
The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus;
Let no such man be trusted.*

The Great Bard is onto something here. Our inner harmony, the music of our souls, the karma, the peace which passes understanding, the deep joy of the spirit, - is too often lost, muddled over, submerged beyond usefulness. Without this music (peace harmony, joy), we have to survive on our wits. We indulge in those “treasons, stratagems, and spoils”. That’s the tragedy of human life.

“Why”, asked Margaret, “can’t the world be like this?” As untold thousands in Colwyn Bay, the Titanic slipway in Belfast, Glasgow Green and Hyde Park (to say nothing of the millions watching on TV and online, in the UK and around the world), sang lustily, merrily, heartily, fervently, imploring God to build his new Jerusalem, to establish his land of hope and glory, his realm of freedom, HERE. NOW. It was as if we had half seen, caught a mere glimpse of, the way the world was intended to be. We’d caught sight of something that humanity has lost (or is losing) and we felt we’d spotted it again, that it hadn’t been lost forever. Our joy was such that it filled our eyes with tears.

This is exactly what Paul believed had happened to him. God, by his inexhaustible patience, had taken Paul who’d abused and persecuted and outraged him, who’d shown prejudice and ignorance towards him, took him and turned him, changed him, charged him to do to others as God was doing to him. Paul was reduced to prayer. He ended this passage thus: “To the King eternal, invisible, the only God, the honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

And that’s where my sermon should come to its conclusion. We must hunt for those lost qualities, those deeply hidden experiences, that self-awareness that reminds us of our relationship with the life-giving God who made us. We should hunt for them. Never-endingly. Until we bring lost sheep back into the fold. Yes, that should be the climax. But I can’t end there. I must tell another story before I finish.

After last Sunday’s service, I was approached by one of our members to tell me that a friend of his had died the previous day after suffering for a whole year with the increasingly debilitating effects of a brain tumour. The death had occurred just 24 hours previously and a funeral/memorial service had to be organised before his parents returned to South Carolina. That took place at 4pm on Wednesday. Two and a half days to organise the service and I’d not even met the family. So imagine me at 9.00am last Monday, welcoming into my office two stunned and traumatised parents, a sibling and a loving friend. I simply didn’t know where to begin. The old folk were trapped in their grief and meeting a stranger, like myself, was the very last thing they wanted to do. We began tenderly and uneasily to tease out a

conversation that would allow me to form an impression of their son. It was difficult and didn't promise very much.

And then I discovered something that proved to be the turning point. The boy's father was an organist and choir director. I showed them the church where the service would take place and encouraged the boy's dad to sit at the console and play a few notes on the organ. He was loathe to do so but eventually sat there and ran his fingers across the keys. Once he'd started there was no stopping him. He could express through his music all the things his soul had closed away. He played "Great is thy faithfulness" and it was a real balm for his tortured soul. To his astonishment, he thought he was hearing a choir singing the words of that well-known hymn. But he wasn't dreaming or imagining it at all. Some Korean visitors, tourists and pilgrims, had entered the Chapel and recognised the tune. So in their own language they gave voice to the words of that hymn about the unconditional and unfailing love of God.

The experience led him to decide that he'd play for the service itself. And he did so through his tears. He improvised the music of that hymn once again and dug deeper and deeper as he found the notes he wanted and turned them into fugues or pillars or great visions of how the world might be. We were all of us in rapt attention, tearful and fearful, knowing we were in the presence of something overwhelming and magnificent. Eventually he brought the piece to an end with some big and complicated chords. As he signed off the piece, his right hand went to his lips and formed a kiss which he threw towards the photograph of his son. I was on the point of total collapse.

It was the gift of God's dead son that offered us a vital ingredient for our lives, unfailing love and a constant supply of grace that makes it possible to bring back the harmony between us and our Maker. It was the gift of young Ben to his dad that helped all of us to explore the feelings swirling in the deepest part of our being where "love and sorrow flow mingled" inextricably together. This is the way we can rediscover, recover, what we've lost. And, as our spirits surge with hope, we will be forcibly reminded of the joy that fills the halls of heaven when what has been lost is found again.

That's our quest. God help us as we pursue our path. Amen.