

Being lost can help us find our way

Sermon by Andy Wurm, Pentecost 14, September 2nd, 2018

Have you ever been lost? When I was young, I was lost at the Royal Adelaide Show. I told the policeman who found me what clothes my parents were wearing. Fortunately, I was reunited with them, despite the fact that my description of them was way off. I have no memory of that event. It's just what I've been told. Usually our memories of being lost are frightening.

We can be lost because we don't know where we are. We can also be lost because we don't know why we are, i.e. why we are here – what our lives are about. Or we don't know what we should do. We're out of our depth. Being lost involves lacking, being without, loss, emptiness. In our culture those are things to avoid. Not that we need much persuading. It's hard to live with such things. When it comes to a life of faith though, being lost is not a bad thing. Usually we describe being lost as not knowing where we are, but when it comes to faith, if we're lost, we do know where we are – we're in the wilderness, the desert. In fact, there are a whole variety of terms we use for the state of being lost.

John of the Cross, who lived about 450 years ago, and one of the great spiritual writers, spoke positively about being lost. If you were going through a difficult time in life and asked him what was wrong with you, he would say something along the lines of:

There's nothing wrong with you; indeed, there's a lot right with you. You're where you should be right now: in the desert, letting the merciless sun do its work; in a dark night, undergoing an alchemy of soul; in exile, lamenting on a foreign shore so that you can better understand your homeland; in the garden, sweating the blood that needs to be sweated to live out your commitments; being pruned, undergoing spiritual chemotherapy, to shrink the tumours of emotional and spiritual dead-wood that have built up from wrong-turns taken; in the upper room, unsure of yourself, waiting for Pentecost before you can set out again with any confidence; undergoing positive disintegration, having your life ripped apart so that you can rearrange it in a more life-giving way; sitting in the ashes, like Cinderella, because only a certain kind of humiliation will ready your soul for celebration; and undergoing purgatory, right here on earth, so your heart, soul, and body can, through this painful purging, learn to embrace what you love without unhealthily wanting it for yourself. (Ron Rolheiser)

John of the Cross sees being lost in terms of God re-directing you to something better. Today we might question that. Often, it's just circumstances that force us to look at life in a new way, and sometimes it's something, or someone, nasty. It doesn't seem like God, but then it depends on how we perceive God at work. How does God lead us to still waters? How does God raise us to life? How does God heal us? Or teach us? None of us probably likes the idea of God manipulating circumstances, such as people who suggest that God made something bad happen, so they could learn a lesson. If things go wrong, can that be God at work? That doesn't seem right. Is God's part just kind of lurking in the background, or maybe more like an orchestra conductor, instructing each element of our circumstances when to play its part? In the past, when people were less interested in how things worked, something was thought to be God's action if it brought about what God would have wanted. If someone was healed, it must have been of God. That makes sense, but today, knowing that drugs may have done it, or the body's normal healing power, means we can be left seeing no place for God in that. There is a way that's helpful and it's really a tweaking of the traditional approach, which is to think of God as working in a multi-dimensional fashion. There is usually more than one way to accomplish something. Think of how a nail could be moved across a table. You could push it, blow it, throw something at it. You could pull it by a magnet. You could tilt the table. You could get someone else to do it. You could go back in

time and design the table with a slope, or if you were God, you would already be back in time. I am not suggesting that God operates in such mechanical ways, but just there are so many influences which can be at work for an event to occur. When it comes to God and the world, there always has to be the preservation of freedom too. Even if we say that God made someone do something, it must be entirely their choice too. But that's not a problem for God. Or another way of understanding what we describe as God's action in our lives might be just to say that in everything and every moment, God is pouring out his love and drawing us towards him.

Why I'm trying to give you a way to think of God being at work in the circumstances of our lives, is that it gives a purpose to our struggles when we are lost. In other words, we may be being led somewhere, we may be having our eyes opened, we may be being 'pruned', or something else. Maybe God has not engineered your being lost, but God is definitely at least involved in helping you get on your feet again.

Having said all that, it doesn't make being lost easier. In today's gospel story we heard Jesus condemning the Pharisees for focussing on the observation of ritual practices. The problem is they have lost touch with the original point of those rituals. It's the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law that counts, when it comes to religion. Jesus' criticism, and that of the prophet Isaiah regarding similar behaviour, centuries before, is telling the Pharisees they're lost. It would have been hard to take. Of a similar magnitude would have been the destruction of the Jewish temple, which would have occurred shortly before today's gospel was written. The Jews would have been so lost without what was at the core of their faith. But they found a new way forward.

Today the church is lost. Changes in society have left it struggling to express what it once did in forms that are relevant. Moral failures, manipulation of people and other flaws have damaged it. In terms of a success-oriented culture, its current status can only be seen as hopeless. But from a faith perspective, it's not all bad. On the periphery, humbled and insecure, is being in the desert. It's where we can find God again, find our way, get in touch with core issues again, go deeper, grow, become better at what we're meant to be doing. And, remembering what I said about how God works, our lostness may not be all our own doing, or all the result of external pressures. If God is God, then maybe we're right where God wants us. Remember when Jesus went out into the wilderness for forty days, it was because the Spirit drove him there. Maybe he did like a challenge, and certainly, the devil was always looking for someone else to tempt, but there was a greater purpose at work.

As church, we can't change our being lost. We have to accept it, especially because somewhere in our lost state is the way out, and the way out is to let go of what we have to let go, learn what we have to learn, humble ourselves in ways we have to humble ourselves, and so on. The real disaster would be to fail to attend to what needs attending to. The author of the Letter of James encourages us to be not hearers of the word, but doers. It's the same as the gospel writers who tell us not to marvel at Christ but become him, let him live in us. That's the real call in our present lostness – to become more Christlike.

In our personal lives too: *we have our good seasons, but also seasons where we lose relationships, lose health, lose friends, lose spouses, lose children, lose jobs, lose prestige, lose our grip, lose our dreams, lose our meaning, and end up humbled, alone, and lonely on a Friday night. But that's a place too, a valid and an important one. Inside that place, our souls are being shaped in ways we cannot understand, but in ways that will stretch and widen them for a deeper love and happiness in the future.* (Ron Rolheiser)