

2007 16 September, Trinity 15

1 Tim 1.12-17

Lk 15.1-10

Last week's very difficult gospel reading ended with Jesus asking how salt that has lost its taste can be restored? The answer, which we will all have wondered about from time to time in our own lives, we have just heard.

But let me start elsewhere.

The Head of St Martin-in-the-Fields High School has a catchphrase recognised by every pupil, "Once a St Martin's girl," – and they all join in – "always a St Martin's girl". You get the same response from Old Girls. The school has changed dramatically over the years. Nowadays it is a highly successful South London comprehensive with a British Jamaican Head and a majority Black racially mixed intake. Outwardly it couldn't be more different to the old Grammar School or the original school for 50 girls founded in this parish but which moved in the 1920's to what Dick Sheppard called "the real fields of Tulse Hill". Yet, "Once a St Martin's girl, always a St Martin's girl".

What is a 'St Martin's' person?

A few years ago, in the earlier stages of gathering support for the buildings renewal project, I stood in the old Social Care Unit with a man slightly younger than me. He is hugely successful in his field and has an international reputation. In the middle of the day centre in the old vaults, we fell silent. The visitor eventually said that he was feeling overwhelmed because he could so easily have been one of our clients. He explained that he had achieved his life's ambitions in his mid-30's – as it were he had climbed his Everest. For the next 10 years he drank heavily and became an alcoholic. He had only just begun to get on top of this and to find new purpose in his life. Standing in our clients' space he was acutely aware of his own vulnerability.

I am no longer surprised that the line between those who are clients of The Connection and those who are staff, volunteers or funders is thin. Indeed I have come to see that it is the recognition of this that defines a 'St Martin's person'.

On Thursday, I went to a posh do out of duty. I found myself sitting next to someone who turned out to be a trustee of one of the charities that has supported the project. They have invited us to make a further application so I suddenly realised why I was there! I talked about St Martin's being an iconic community and that what we are engaged in isn't really a building project. His reply was to tell me that 5 years ago he had a very difficult time because of a court case he felt was not of his own making. In the stress he began to drink too much and ended up in The Priory. His doctor – the son of Canon Collins, it's a small world - told him he had to find a new purpose for living, almost to reinvent himself, which in your 50's is a difficult thing to do. It was evident talking to him that he had done so, but not in a way that meant he had left all the difficulties behind. Through this

unwelcome, surprising experience he had grown as a person, and so had his sympathies for people in need. In worldly terms he was still pretty successful but he knew his vulnerability. "Once a St Martin's person, always a St Martin's person".

Whereas the organising principle of other churches can be Pentecost or Easter, it's pretty obvious that for us it is Good Friday and the cross. Those of us who belong to St Martin's are people who know our own vulnerability either in ourselves, or close second hand. The best of us have been broken and we have the experience and the faith to hope that being broken is the prerequisite to being broken open, to resurrection. So this isn't a gloomy church but a profoundly hopeful one.

Now back to that question left hanging last week about how salt which has lost its taste can be restored.

The answer is the stories in Luke 15 of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son (or prodigal son) which are unique to Luke. They don't appear in any of the other Gospels yet are among the best known of Bible stories. Why? Because they speak so clearly to our own experience. The way they are introduced makes it abundantly clear that we're not the 99 waiting for the 1 to discover the error of his or her ways and be brought home. We are that 1:

"Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them a parable....

Or if we are among the 99 now, we know the experience of the 1, are thankful to have been sought and found, accepted and forgiven. We know we are incomplete without them.

We have been on an extraordinary journey with the renewal of St Martin-in-the-fields these last few years. Some of it has been documented, lots hasn't. I suppose we will talk about it for a while to come but I hope very quickly we will simply get used to using the renewed buildings for the purposes they have and continue to look forward, not back.

You might remember a film-maker, Chris Terrill, coming in and out for about a year. He has made 3 documentaries which will be shown on Channel 5 in December. One is about the pilgrimage to Canterbury and includes a section on a young woman who was an absolute nightmare. She was a crack addict and exhibited what might be described as "challenging behaviour". Yet she says the pilgrimage was a turning point in her life. She wasn't judged or excluded but accepted and contained. She moved from the end of the pilgrimage into a rehabilitation clinic. Eighteen months later she is still clean from drugs, is living independently and has a job. "Once a St Martin's person, always a St Martin's person".

There's a depth to this community. It depends not on us, that's exactly the point. When the salt has lost its taste it is only Christ who can restore.