

The Search Party

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Date: 18 March 2001

Preacher: Murray Lamont

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 18th of March 2001. The preacher is Murray Lamont.

His sermon is entitled The Search Party and is from Luke chapter 15 verses 1 to 10. Lord, we thank you that we can come together and worship you in song, that we can come before you as our Lord and Saviour, that we can come with our needs and our cares as well as our joys.

We thank you for your word and we ask that we not only hear it, that we place it in our daily lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Please be seated. Well, I thank Paul and you as a congregation, as a people, for the opportunity to come and share with you.

I've preached a few sermons from this pulpit. In fact, I preached my first sermon ever from the old pulpit. And those who've heard it have probably forgotten it, I hope.

[1 : 19] But I don't want you to forget something that I'm going to share with you today. A number of weeks ago, I travelled out to Winton in western Queensland.

We're trying to decide whether it's southern or central Queensland, but it certainly is out west in Queensland. It's a very small community.

It's remote, certainly. I had to travel on four aircraft to get there. And as I travelled and saw the country unfold below me, I was astounded once again at the vastness of this continent.

Winton, I was going to Winton because we were to induct a new minister and his wife into the parish. BCA supports the parish there.

And the queens, who were going from Hobart to Winton, were to be inducted. It was a good night. It was about 42 degrees Celsius.

[2 : 28] It was humid. And it was a marvellous welcome. Part of the sermon illustration was one of going from the icebox or from the freezer to the oven.

And the illusion was that Dennis Quinn not only was going from Hobart, but in fact had been a scientist at the research station at Antarctica.

And here he is in the middle of Queensland. That's part of the ministry that I represent in remote and outback areas of Australia and something that I'd like to share with you after the service.

But I want us to think about our national fervour that was awakened for many of us, for some of us, perhaps we were a bit sceptical, during the Olympic Games and during the Federation celebrations this year.

When things such as a national anthem and other anthems that are sung or poetry that's read often stir in us that lump in the throat, that feeling of, yes, this is my country and I'm proud of it.

[3 : 48] I'm going to read to you a poem that I think for many will do that and for some they'll probably have memorised it in their school days.

There was movement at the station for the word had passed around that the cult from old regret had got away and had joined the wild bush horses.

He was worth a thousand pound. So all the cracks had gathered to the fray. All the tried and noted riders from the stations near and far had mustered at the homestead overnight.

For the bushmen love hard riding where the wild bush horses are and the stock horse snuffs the battle with delight. Now if you don't know the poem, it's Banjo Patterson's poem, The Man from Snowy River.

There's been a movie made, a series made, there's been a Toyota ad made of the man who goes over the brink, over the precipice, after the horses, against the odds and against the better judgement of the other riders.

[5 : 10] And the end of the poem, he brings the horses back and he brings the prize colt, the one who had gotten away with the wild ones. He brings them back.

It's a story that for many gives us that romantic image of Australia that so many of us like to think we're part of. But most of us live around the shoreline, around the coast.

And many of us unfortunately don't get out to many of these places. But I ask you, what is it about this story that does engender that feeling of national pride?

I'll go on to tell the rest of the story. The man from Snowy River tells the story of the crack riders who had gathered to run down the mob of wild horses and get back the prize colt.

Among the riders, there's a young man on a small and weedy beast. And the boss tells him, lad, you'd better stop away. Those hills are far too rough for such as you.

[6 : 23] But Clancy of the overflow, a rider of great renown and of a number of poems that Banjo wrote, steps in for him, puts in a good word and in the end, the young lad is allowed to come.

And hopefully you do know the rest. How the man from Snowy River does what none of the other crack riders were able to do. How he follows the mob down the mountainside where none of the others would dare to go.

And how finally, alone and unassisted, he brings the mob back. What we like about this story is it's the story of the underdog.

It's the story of the one who wouldn't normally have made it. It's the story of the one who is not the achiever or not seen in that way.

It's the one who was originally rejected as not being good enough to come who in the end achieves what none of the others are able to do. Those who fancied themselves turned out to be failures.

[7 : 37] And the one who was rejected and looked least likely to succeed turns out to be the best. In the Isaiah passage that was read this morning, the prophet speaks of a man who was despised and rejected.

This person seemed to have absolutely nothing going for him. There was nothing about him to suggest that he could achieve anything important. It says, he had no dignity or beauty to make us take notice of him.

There was nothing attractive about him, nothing that would draw us to him. We despised him and rejected him. He was a complete outcast, a complete reject.

But the astonishing thing is that this man whose whole life seemed to be nothing but shame, defeat, suffering and failure at the end is seen truly to have done something that no one else was able to do.

This reject, this outcast turns out to be the deliverer of his people. The one who was treated brutally and with contempt is the one who was finally honoured by God and gazed at him in wonder by kings.

[9 : 05] And what this is telling us is that if we're to find the champion sent by God, we have to be careful where we look. We're not to look among the crack riders, the powerful people, perhaps the clever, those who are successful and admired by all.

Instead, in these circumstances, we're directed to a man hanging on a cross, wounded, beaten up, shockingly disfigured, treated with contempt.

That's the story of the gospel. It's the story of God's rescue mission, as it were, for us. He's going out and looking for the lost, as in the story of the lost sheep.

The woman who'd lost a coin amongst ten. It's interesting, isn't it, that our ten dollar note has Banjo Patterson and the story of the man from Snowy River.

Ten dollars would be a good donation to BCA. Or more. But the story is of the one who was rejected, who wins through in the end.

[10 : 38] The men who looked down on the man from Snowy River and wanted him excluded from the ride would have felt pretty silly when he won through at the end.

They would have had to admit that they were completely wrong, wrong about him because he turned out to be much better than they thought, and wrong about themselves because it turned out that they weren't as good as they thought they were.

This is what happens when we see what Jesus did for us on the cross. We're forced to admit that we have been wrong, wrong about this man whom we despised and rejected, wrong in our ideas about how good we are.

And it's God's grace and his love that gives us the ability to understand that we're forgiven.

But because of the cross God has shown his love to be far deeper than we can understand. when the man from Snow River brought the horses back, the other riders could only look on with astonishment and admiration.

[12 : 04] They didn't hold back in their prayers of what he'd done. It was an incredible achievement. They had to hand it to him. Where they had failed as a group, he had succeeded on his own.

And they would have given him the honour due to him. In fact, the poem ends by saying, the man from Snowy River is a household word today and the stockman tell the story of his ride.

God, my question to you here is, is Jesus Christ the household word today? And are you willing to tell the story of his life as these people would have been willing and as a nation continues to dwell in the understanding of the romanticism of this story?

Do we as Christians go out and tell the story of Jesus or is his name just a swear word? And we keep quiet about it because that's what mission is.

Mission is the willingness to go out and tell our neighbours about Jesus Christ. So we're all missionaries.

[13 : 30] We're all part of God's rescue team. we're all capable of doing that. And you might ask me how. Well, many of you already get this magazine as supporters of the society and you've got an extra one today and I want you to give it to a neighbour.

I want you to take it and give it to someone who you know is interested in the outback and say, you might be interested in this. it's from our church.

We support people that work out in these remote areas and I'd love you to have it and read the stories. Give it to a non-Christian and start the rescue part as you continue to work with God to tell them of his love for them.

Ted and Maughan Watkins were here last week and I'm sure that Ted would have shared with you some of the horrors and hardships as well as some of the joys of working in a place like Lee Creek and travelling up and down the tracks to minister.

A very difficult ministry. They've left there and we're still looking for someone to go to Lee Creek and as a parish you now are supporting the Tickners.

[14 : 56] Anne and Nick who are the house parents at the BCA hostel in Broken Hill. Now there's not much of a harder job than being house parents to teenagers.

All year, 24 hours a day, seven days a week looking after a house full of teenagers. Some of you have done it. But there are others.

They're up to 20 teenagers at a time. And they come from homes that are usually homes that are pretty tough from remote areas.

So I want you to pray for them. Get to know them. There will be a photograph. There's a photograph out in the hall, et cetera, for you to see who they are. But be at prayer for them because part of their ministry is to bring this message of rescue to those children and also to their parents.

It's an outreach that we have. And they need your support. I want to tell you a story about one of my experiences. It helps you to understand why BCA sees it so important to go out to remote places and to take services for only one or two people to go large distances and to be there.

[16 : 16] It was one of my experiences early in my time at Kununurra in the top of Western Australia. It was a large parish and I could easily travel 1,200 kilometres north to south and still be in the parish area.

And this was the first Easter and a baptism had been organised by the locum who had preceded me in the parish. For Easter Saturday. So I arrived at this station which was 960 kilometres south of Kununurra.

Right in the desert was a cattle station and their area was about 1.4 million acres in size. Big area. But when you see how much grass was there you understand why it had to be so big because it was very desolate and sparse.

Easter Saturday the invitation had gone out weeks ahead to all these people around the area the other station owners community people from the Aboriginal communities and friends and family of the people who were to be having the baptism.

And that all gathered and when I arrived there on the Saturday they were all sitting in it in rows like you outside under some beautiful shady trees but in rows and I was quite upset.

[17 : 35] I was hoping that they'd be in a circle a bit more informal until I realised that they were in rows so they could watch AFL football on a large TV with a satellite dish.

On the invitation it said come and see the football on Easter Saturday have a barbecue have a time with us. By the way we're going to baptise the kids.

And so I had to wait until half time until the baptism took place. They'd filled a bath with bore water. The water bubbles out of the ground at about 60 degrees there and that's their drinking water etc. during the dry season and they'd filled this bath fortunately the day before so it had cooled to a temperature that was a bit easier than 60 degrees.

And I baptised a number of infants and a young man who had been prepared for baptism very well. And it was a good service. It was an encouraging time to very early in my ministry there get to know many of these people from surrounding areas.

[18 : 44] After the service many people wanted to get back to the football and start the barbecue but some came up to talk to me and one man was memorable. His name was Jock and Jock was six foot tall very upright and snowy white hair and quite slim.

He shook my hand firmly and he had this beautiful smile which was etched into his leathery skin. He'd lived all his life in the Kimberley and he was a half-caste Aboriginal man and he'd worked on the stations all his life more or less.

And Jock as he shook my hand said that's the first church service I've ever been to in my life. And I found out that Jock was 88. And so that was a surprise to some extent.

There'd been ministry visited out there but obviously not when Jock was around or when he'd gone. He'd been to funerals but they hadn't been taken by a Christian minister. They'd been taken by someone on the station.

As the afternoon went on an event occurred which still amazes me. Jock came back to me and he said I've just remembered a story about a little boy who killed a giant with a rock.

[20 : 09] And I said well Jock that might be the story from the Bible about David killing the giant Goliath. And he went away and he came back not long afterwards and he said I've remembered another story about a strong man who had long hair and they cut his hair short and he lost all his strength.

And I said Jock I think you're remembering Bible stories. That's the story of Samson. But we couldn't work out how Jock knew Bible stories. I asked around and talked to the manager and his wife.

They'd only been there about 15 years so they didn't know much. But one of the old... That's sort of right here in Doncaster isn't it? You've got to be here about 70 years before you're a local.

But one of the elderly Aboriginal ladies by the name of Mary which always seems to be the names of old Aboriginal ladies she said to me Jock's mother used to read Bible stories to the children.

She was one of the children. women. And she used to read them to them regularly. That was an amazing story because here's Jock, 88, and here's an Aboriginal lady back in those days when he was a little boy who could read.

[21 : 32] She must have learnt probably from missionaries or someone. We don't know. She died when Jock was 11. And my understanding is that Jock had blotted out memories of hurt because he'd lost his mum so he wasn't going to remember any of those stories and he didn't remember much about his mum.

And for 77 years they'd lay dormant. Before I left that day I had to go back to Halls Creek which was about 500km up the track to take a service for Easter day the next day.

And so I had to leave unfortunately and Jock asked for a Bible and I said Jock what are you going to do with the Bible can you read? And he said no I can't read. And he insisted I give him a Bible so I gave him a Bible and left.

I rang a few weeks later and talked to the manager's wife and she was quite upset with me. She said you gave Jock a Bible didn't you? And I said yes I did.

She said well you know what he's got them doing? He's got them reading it. And I said well what do you mean? At this stage Jock was the cook on the camps on the outstation camps when they were mustering etc.

[22 : 55] And he'd said if you want to eat you've got to read the Bible for me. And he did.

So three times a day. Breakfast, lunch and tea. In fact he told me that he wanted them to have the readings before smoke morning tea and afternoon tea and they said no to that.

But they started doing a Bible study and I mean that because what they did was they'd have a Bible reading I don't know how they worked it out what they were going to read. But then he'd ask questions.

He'd say what's that mean? You can imagine what some of the answers were. Because there were young jackaroos and jillaroos who would go out there to train. There'd be old hands.

There'd be such a mixture of people on these camps including the manager and his wife at times that would be reading the Bible. So it went on and a number of months later Jock asked me if I would baptise him.

[23 : 58] And I was overwhelmed with the idea. Initially I had to think I wonder if someone came out and baptised him when he was a baby.

And we've got a baptism today. And I was very happy to baptise this man. His mother had set a seed in his life as a little boy by reading scripture to him.

And 88 years later suddenly like the desert when it gets rain it blossomed. And this man was a missionary for God.

So I went out there and baptised him in that same place. There'd been some rain so I was able to baptise him in the billabong. And as he came out of the water he'd read a number of times to me. Well when Jock read that meant that he memorised the story because someone had read it to him. But he'd always hold the Bible and he'd ask someone to find the right page and then he'd tell you the story as he'd memorised it.

[25 : 04] And he'd read to me that way a number of times before his baptism and the baptism of Jesus. And so when he came out of the water he looked up as if there was supposed to be a dove.

And he said to the people who were surrounding the billabong he said I've been rescued. That was his simple testimony. I've been rescued by Jesus.

There were about 300 people at his baptism and a very mixed group of people I can tell you. And it was a great time. Many of the other people came up and said we understand so much more since we've been reading the Bible.

How many times do you hear people say that? How many times do you hear yourself say that when you've sort of gone a little bit astray like the lost sheep or whatever and then you realise that you've got to read the scriptures and God brings you back.

About two years after that. So really when we understand Jock was probably 90 years old he died. And he died peacefully in his sleep where he'd grown up and lived.

[26 : 19] And they asked me to take the funeral and we asked the government if I could bury him in that same place where he'd been baptised and lived all his life. In fact part of the story is that Jock's surname was Mosquito because he was born on Mosquito Creek and the billabong was part of Mosquito Creek.

So at his burial I buried him and there were about 600 people arrived at the funeral. There was no football on that day. They came for Jock. And to remember the life of a man who had changed people enormously in the last two years of his life.

Now if you think of that story which I was privileged to be involved in it goes against the grain of everything the world says. Here's a man who's illiterate. A man who is half cast.

Therefore he's outcast by most of the community. He was his mother bore him out of wedlock. He lived in one of the most remote parts of Australia if not the world.

And yet he touched lives for God. So never say to me you're too old to be a missionary. Never come and say I haven't got any gifts because God gives us the gifts that are required to share the gospel with the people we meet.

[27 : 49] And that's exactly what Jock did. And that's what he encourages us to do. To be part of his rescue team. To be missionaries for him. To go over the precipice as it were and let God take us into new ground.

That's what missionary agency is about. That's what this parish is about as you reach out to people around you. And a missionary agency is really just a continuation of that in further places.

Whether it be here in Australia or overseas. So be encouraged that you might not be called by God to go out there. But you're being called by God to do something.

And it might be that that magazine is the start of you being able to share that message of rescue with others. There's a great story in there from Ted and Morwen about their ministry.

With the man from Snowy River, as I said, his name was a household word. And we need to be people who are ready to share the name of Jesus in a positive way in this very negative world. [29 : 00] world. We need to put forward our champion. And at Easter, as we come to Easter again, we celebrate that fact that Jesus is our champion.

He went where we couldn't go and he did what we could not do. He went looking for us when we were lost and he brought us safely back to God.

Lord, our heavenly father, we thank you that we're all part of your rescue team.

Like Jock, you have rescued us and brought us home. Help us to be ready to go out and seek others who are lost in the same way.

Be with those who work in our areas of remote ministry today. We pray especially for the Tickners and the students at Broken Hill that they care for.

[30 : 20] Be with them, Lord, and encourage them and pour your blessings upon them. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.