



Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Sharmain James



Sunday 30 July 2023

READINGS

Genesis 29:1-28; Psalm 105:1-11; Romans 8:26-30; Matthew 13:31-33,44-52

Hidden Treasure and Pearls

Over the past couple of weeks, we've been listening to the parables found in Matthew 13. How we hear them depends on the condition of our hearts. If we listen well, these stories change us. They teach us about God's kingdom, and identify us as children of that kingdom, showing us how to live into that identity. As we hear these parables, then, we need to be careful not to let them go "in one ear and out the other." They need to go deep into our hearts, where they can work on us and change us - because they are stories of the present kingdom of heaven.

Today in our Gospel reading - Jesus brings this subject matter to a close, in His finale, Jesus seeks to express the value of this kingdom and our participation in it. Our gospel reading for today calls us to be SEEKERS in pursuit of the most precious thing in the world – the Kingdom of God – and we should be struggling for those principles which alone can give our lives meaning and direction.

Two of Jesus' parables today make that point: The parable of the hidden treasure and of the pearl. They differ from the other parables of the kingdom of God: the wheat and the weeds – the mustard seed – the parable of the yeast – the parable of the net – they speak of the members of the kingdom of God as a group, but the parable of the hidden treasure and the pearl are addressed to the individual.

In our first picture, the kingdom of heaven is likened to "a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field." Treasures were often hidden in fields, because there were no formal banks as we know them today. It was not uncommon for people to hide valuables when a raiding army approached. If the homeowner did not survive the invasion, the treasure would be forgotten and unclaimed. The land could change hands several times without anyone being aware of hidden treasure. So the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure that lies unnoticed because of its hidden nature. However, Jesus stresses that the man is not searching for the treasure. He happens to stumble upon it and instantly recognizes its value. By selling all that he has to purchase the field, he is gaining something far more valuable than any of his possessions and far more valuable than the field itself. The emphasis is on the supreme worth of the treasure that is unseen by others; it is worth far more than any sacrifice one might make to acquire it.

In the second parable Jesus expresses continuity regarding the value of the kingdom of God. In this one, however, instead of unexpectedly stumbling across a hidden treasure, we find a merchant who is out deliberately searching. He is apparently a wholesale pearl dealer on a professional trip looking for fine

pearls for his business. “When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. As with the parable of the treasure, this one stresses the incomparable quality of the kingdom of God. But a contrast between the two parables illustrates that instead of simply stumbling across a hidden treasure, a diligent search by one well qualified to know its value will ultimately lead to the kingdom. Moreover, as an expert, the merchant knows that even if he sells all that he has, the pearl he possesses surpasses all his former accumulated wealth.

So what is there to gather from these two parables?

The point is not on buying one’s way into the kingdom but on recognizing its supreme value. Earlier Jesus used a pearl to illustrate the precious nature of the gospel that could not be appreciated by pigs (7:6). The religious leaders of Jesus’ day were certainly those whose expertise qualified them to understand the magnitude of the kingdom of God that Jesus announced, but they were blinded by their hypocrisy and their desire for a pious reputation and honour from people (6:1–3). Jesus’ disciples are to understand that there is nothing more valuable in all of the world than possession of the kingdom of God.

However, we see in both accounts that the ‘treasure’ was not found by accident. Each man had to exert some effort...he had to seek this treasure. The man may have “found” the treasure, but if he had not been working in the field, he would not have found it, and it certainly called for some effort to gain possession of it! We hear the echo of such in Matthew 6:33 "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." The kingdom of heaven is the greatest treasure, one that should compel us to give up everything like the person who finds treasure buried in a field or the merchant who buys the pearl, just to make sure we have it in our possession.

Is that how we look upon the kingdom of God?

What would we sell in order to acquire it?

What truly holds that kind of value for you today?

Imagine what all these men gave up to gain this one treasure? Things which held emotional attachment. All that which materially made up their lives up to that point. They knew that nothing they owned could compare to the great treasure they had finally found. The point of these two parables is the great value of being a part of God’s kingdom. Jesus is not pointing out what we must give up to enter His kingdom. He is telling us that it is worth more than everything else. The kingdom is also something that requires hard work, hence the analogy with fishermen throwing nets into the sea to capture fish and then sort the good from the bad.

Think of that net as the destiny St. Paul mentions in today’s epistle. God predestined mankind to be called to him, to be justified and glorified in his name, yet we all maintain free will to choose otherwise. So, at the end of the age, when the angels “separate the wicked from the righteous,” each of us will learn how precious the treasure of heaven is according to the way we chose to pursue it during our lifetime.

We are ambassadors of the kingdom of heaven, the greatest treasure of this world, and each day we should repeatedly give thanks for the incredible value of this gift that we handle. Therein lies our true joy. Amen.