

Sunday Sermon – 26th July 2020
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People love mystery. It's the reason why people love crime stories films. There is always something a little unknown which keeps the reader or viewer guessing. Mystery, properly used, can heighten our worship because it allows us to get an idea of something about God, without trying to reduce God to such mundane levels that we can actually understand it completely.

Today's Gospel is all about the Kingdom of God. Jesus, knowing that we cannot really have any concept of what God's kingdom is actually like, instead gives us a set of images, drawn from everyday life, in order to illustrate something of the kingdom of God. We are given a tantalising glimpse of what God's kingdom is about, a glimpse that beckons us to want to find out more: a glimpse that still keeps the absolute truth hidden in a cloud of mystery.

Three parables, then, two of which at first glance are closely linked in meaning but with slight differences which actually change the meaning of one of the parables totally. But to do them justice, I'm going to look at the third parable first.

The draw net is well known to deep sea fishermen. Often hung behind a ship (or pair of ships) it can extend for some kilometres. At the appropriate time certain ropes are pulled and the net becomes a form of bag, holding in all the fish which had been caught in its path. Nothing escapes - all the fish are drawn in. The job of the fishermen is to then sort through the catch, discarding any fish that are unwanted. In the parable of the draw net, we are reminded that the kingdom of God is a collection of all kinds of people. The Church is a Church of both saints and sinners. Jesus made it clear that he came to call the sinners rather than the righteous. But we need to recognise that not everyone who is a member of the church is actually destined for a place in the kingdom. Like some of Jesus' other unpopular parables, there is a time of sorting, good fish from rotten fish; wheat from chaff; righteous from unrighteous.

The kingdom of God, on earth, is a mixed bag of people. There will be always be a temptation on the part of some who feel they are more "faithful" to separate themselves from the "bad eggs"; from the weeds. That sort of separation leads to division and schism. And it's not our job to do that, nor is it even our job to decide on the time for it. Jesus tells us that that is the work of God in God's own good time. In the meantime, it is for us to learn to be tolerant, compassionate and understanding of those who seem to fall far below our understanding of the requirements of the Gospel and the Kingdom, whilst always bearing in mind that we might actually be the ones who fall short ourselves. Because the truth is that we are all a mixture of the good and the rotten. How rotten your neighbour is, is for God to determine, not you. Because God might actually perceive your neighbour to be better than you are.

Not only that, but our understanding of the Gospel might be wrong. Even those who have studied it for years can be mistaken on fundamental, often repeated ideas which can dramatically skew their worldview.

Judgment is for God and for later. Right now, it is for us to use the time given to us to go in search of the treasure and the pearl of great price, of the gift to be able to identify, with Jesus, the really true, the good and the beautiful, and to help others too in the same search.

So lets look at these first two parables. At first glance they seem to say the same thing - namely that the kingdom of heaven is something that we should do everything we can to obtain: to know God and to live according to the Gospel are the most precious things in life. Through Jesus and the Gospel we come to know and understand what is the real meaning of life, what are the most important things in life.

In the first parable Jesus compares the Kingdom to the treasure in a field that is found, quite by accident. In this parable, the man comes across the treasure but the field where it is hidden does not belong to him. He sells everything he has in order to get ownership of the field and hence of its buried treasure. The idea obviously is that when one really discovers Jesus and his vision of life everything else becomes secondary. Do everything to be a part of that vision.



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The second parable, on the surface, sounds similar. A businessman is looking for fine pearls. When he finds the one he wants, he sells everything else he has in order to acquire it. Simple.

So why tell it twice?

The usual reason given is that there is a slight, (but significant) difference between the two stories. For, in the first, the man was not actually looking for the treasure. We might stumble across the knowledge of God and his son quite by accident. In the second parable, however, the man is on the lookout for the "pearl of great price". He knows it must exist and he uses all his energies to find it. In other words, despite the fact that we are churchgoers, we still need to pursue constantly the true and full meaning of the Gospel which can escape us for many years. We always need to understand more, to love more, to serve more.

True though this is, it doesn't seem correct to me. Look at the reading again. In the first parable, the kingdom of God is likened to the treasure. In the second, the kingdom is likened to the merchant - not the pearl! This casts a very different complexion on the parable. Read in this light, we see that the merchant is symbolic of Christ with the pearl being the elect destined for God's kingdom. Christ paid the price with everything he had - including his life - in order to obtain that pearl.

It's not until you actually read what is written and throw away your assumptions of what you think is written that you get close to the truth regarding the Kingdom of God. Like a whodunnit, the devil is in the detail. When Poirot, or Morse or Holmes solve a mystery, it is only through looking at the evidence closely and not merely superficially that they have success. If that's how fictional characters treat their mysteries, do we not owe it to God and ourselves to examine our faith in the same level of detail?

Throw away all that you think you know. Read - really read- the scriptures. Be open to the idea that long held beliefs might be wrong (or simply mistaken). This is the treasure hidden in a field for which a man sells everything to have. The ability to see is what opens the door to the Kingdom of God, that world of interlocking relationships between God, human beings and our world which brings to all security, happiness and peace.

For in that world there is truth, in that world there is love and caring, in that world there is freedom and peace.

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