

Sermon 26 July 2026

Hymns

380 O Lord my God

442 Seek ye first

39 As the deer pants

186 Great is thy faithfulness

164 Go forth and tell

Sermon

In today's gospel reading, we hear Jesus still trying to describe what it means to be a follower of Jesus. He's continuing his description of what the kingdom of God is like, and telling us who is likely to get there, and what we have to do to get there. So we've heard the parables of the sower and of the weeds, which tell us that people have different responses to the gospel, and that it is not

easy to be a faithful follower of Christ, because there are so many hazards in the way.

In this pericope, though, he is adding something new into the mix. He tells us that from tiny things, great things grow, and others might find shelter and comfort in those greater things. He is telling us how precious the kingdom is, before reminding us again that not everyone will get there. He finishes by letting his disciples know that they now have enough understanding to be able to be teachers like the scribes.

The parable of the mustard seed is pretty well known, I think. And of course the mustard seed is used as the name of a movement to encourage greater things to grow bigger in the church. I'm not always convinced by the image of the mustard plant growing into a tree in which birds can shelter, but I can see why he uses the image of this tiny, tiny seed as something from which great things can grow. The seed is about potential: potential for becoming something much bigger which benefits others also. Jesus is inviting us not

to ignore that tiny seed within our hearts, but to nurture it and let it grow. Allow God's creative powers to work on it and see what happens. He knows the plans he has for you, even if you don't!

The next two parables are very simple in a way. They simply compare the kingdom of God to some treasure. In the first story, it is an ordinary person who finds buried treasure in a field. Something beautiful and special in the mucky earth. Now, it wasn't unusual to hide treasure in the ground at that time. Generally, it was the safest place to hide it. The person who finds this treasure hides it again and goes to buy the field. He gives everything he has for it. Passing over the ethics of his behaviour, Jesus suggests that the kingdom is very precious, but not easily found. It lies hidden in the most ordinary, the most earthly. When we do find it, we do all we can to hold on to it, we give everything we have to hold on to it.

The story of the pearl appears to be the same, but there are subtle differences. I like this story. I don't know whether you've noticed, but on two of

my stoles, I have an embroidered cross with a tiny pearl in the middle of it. Because to me, that pearl is to be found on the cross, at the heart of the cross. In Jesus' story, it is a pearl merchant who goes looking for the best pearl he can find. Merchants in Israel at the time were people viewed with suspicion, as they tended not to be very trustworthy. A bit like our business classes today. This merchant is quite wealthy, or he would not be out looking for the biggest and best pearl he can buy. So Jesus' listeners would be suspicious of this man. They would see him as someone out for what he could get to make a profit on it. But we can also understand him as a person who is actively seeking the kingdom of God. He has most of his earthly desires already, but he wants something more, something more precious.

And this precious thing comes not from the soil or the rocks. This precious thing is created by a tiny creature's response to an irritating grain of sand. The sand rubs the oyster sore, so it creates nacre

as a barrier between it and the sand, gradually building up the layers until there is a pearl. And where, for that oyster, the pearl is nothing, for us that pearl is a thing of great beauty and value. We cannot make pearls ourselves: we can only possess them. That's exactly what this merchant does. Having found the pearl of great value, he gives up absolutely everything he has to possess that pearl.

And again, think about how that pearl sits at the heart of the cross on my stole. It can be understood as Jesus, or the heart of Jesus, sitting at the centre of everything he sacrificed for us. He suffered great pain for our sake. He wasn't able to generate something to limit the irritation and pain, like the oyster. He simply suffered. Are we willing to give up everything in order to be with him?

So the two stories about the treasure show that in order to have the kingdom of heaven, we have to be willing to give up everything we have. Family, possessions, money, lifestyle. Everything, in order

to be with Jesus. Does Jesus mean us to do that literally? Perhaps with some people, yes. For others it may be more of a matter of ordering our priorities: we focus on the treasure – Jesus – in our lives and ignore the pull of more material things. We lay those to one side so that they do not distract us.

And then Jesus turns again to the issue of separating the good from the bad through the story of the fish in the net. And now we begin to understand, in the light of the two stories about treasure, what it means to be the good fish. Or the good crop in the earlier stories. So the stories don't belong in isolation: they inform each other. Just as Jesus tells the disciples, the Jewish Bible – what we call the Old Testament – informs the new gospel of Jesus. As the stories make less sense when read apart from each other, so the Old and New testaments make less sense if they are not read together: one informs the other.

Wow! So much teaching packed into one tiny passage. So much treasure packed into one tiny

pearl. Are we willing to lay other things aside to reflect on what all this means, and to try to find the treasure?