

Reflection for Sunday 26th July 2020

The Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Reading: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

We come this morning to the last of three passages from chapter 13 of Matthew's gospel which focuses on some of Jesus' parables. Two weeks ago we heard Steve Weston speak on the Parable of the Sower, and last week we heard Mark speak on the Parable of the Weeds in the Field. One thing which is so powerful about those two parables is that not only do we have the teaching as Jesus delivered it to the crowds around him, but we also get the amazing accounts of Jesus sharing, in private with his disciples, the meaning of each of those parables. We get no such help this morning!

The word parable is almost exclusively associated with the teaching of Jesus and stems from the Greek word *parabole* which literally means "throwing (*bole*) alongside (*para*)" and is used to describe a deeper truth by means of a simple illustration or analogy. I'm sure, like me, some of your favourite Bible passages are parables – they have such power in their simplicity which makes them so memorable, and today we have five more to enjoy.

We began with Jesus addressing the crowds and sharing with them the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast. We then skipped some verses when Jesus went indoors where the disciples came to him for an explanation of the parable of the weeds in the field – as we heard last week. And then he continues with telling the disciples the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl merchant, and then the parable of the net which appears to be a variation on the parable of the weeds. A recurring theme of many of Jesus' parables as recorded by Matthew is that they begin: "The kingdom of heaven is like...". These are not just pleasant little stories to make us think, they are clear signposts towards God's kingdom and what life should be like if we subject ourselves to his authority.

I want to focus today on the two parables we find in verses 44-46 – the parables of the hidden

treasure and the pearl merchant:

"The kingdom of heaven is like 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.

'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.'

At first reading they appear very similar, not least as they seem to end with the same outcome, but there are some subtle differences between them.

In the case of the treasure hidden in the field the man who finds it comes across it by accident. Who this man is and what he is doing in someone else's field we don't know. At this point I struggle to suppress the picture of someone with a patch over one eye, a wooden leg, a parrot on his shoulder and a map in his hand with a big red X marked on it. But however the treasure came to be there – and it clearly doesn't belong to the current owner of the field - the man stumbles across it and very quickly realises its importance. He doesn't take the treasure there and then but goes about matters legally, hiding it away again before he goes and sells everything he has in order to buy that field. Notice how he goes away joyful. His discovery is life transforming.

By contrast the pearl merchant's purpose in life is to deliberately seek out and acquire the best pearls he possibly can. He knows a good pearl when he sees one and he would have seen thousands over the course of his career. He has a full and deep understanding of the qualities that make one pearl better than another, and an eye for spotting them. But then the day comes when, amongst the many pearls, he spots one of great value – he knows that that pearl is one he must secure for himself. Once again the response is to sell all he has so that he may own for himself the finest of pearls.

So, how might we interpret these brief picture stories – who are they alluding to and what are they teaching us about the kingdom of heaven? If we think about the characters in other parables, some might represent God the Father – like the owner of the vineyard; and some might represent Jesus – like the sower of the good seed in the parable of the weeds. Sometimes ordinary people like you and me appear, perhaps as sheep or goats, wheat or weeds. So who is being represented here?

One clue to follow is the way the parables begin so let's now examine them in turn. In the first one we hear "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field". God's kingdom – the treasure – is present in this world – the field – but out of immediate sight to those who are not looking for it, who don't know where to find it. That would appear to be as true today as it was when Jesus spoke these words. So our parable describes a man finding the kingdom of heaven. That man then is us, each one of us as individuals making our way through life. But one day, out of the blue, we spot something shiny, attractive that grabs our attention for a moment. It could be a person we meet, a song we hear, a book we read. Something brings us up short and makes us realise there's something more to life, that God and his kingdom are not only real but something we can experience in our own lives. As we ponder, perhaps even pray, over what we've found we recognise that our need for God, for a relationship with him, supersedes all other human desires. And so we reach the point of decision, where we find that to have this "treasure" in our lives means surrendering everything we have, everything we are. With joy we give our all to possess the treasure of being part of God's kingdom.

So to our other parable to which one might give a similar interpretation. The difference this time would be that many of us are actively searching – like the merchant – only for us it's for meaning in life, rather than a pearl. And when, amongst all the choices we could make in life we find the better way, the pearl of great value, we again make that choice to give up everything else we have to take up our place in God's kingdom.

But there is an alternative view – remember, this parable begins "the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls". The heavenly element this time would appear to be the merchant himself. So what of the pearls, could they be us, the people of world? To the untrained eye one pearl may pretty well look like another, but to the expert eye, to the one who judges, they will recognise great value when they see it. As with the parable of the weeds there is a sense of Jesus judging those who might be gathered into his kingdom and those to be rejected. As soon as he finds one of great value then his mission as a merchant is fulfilled – he gives up all he has so that one "pearl" might be brought home. All it needs is just one person of value to justify Jesus giving up everything to purchase their – our – salvation. Could this be an allusion to Jesus and his coming sacrifice for the sins of all?

Our passage ends with Jesus asking the disciples if they have understood the parables he's given them. "Yes" they replied. But did they? Do we? However we interpret these parables the crucial thing is we allow them to take hold of us, to build us up in our own faith and trust in Jesus. The way that Jesus so skilfully paints such evocative pictures in just a few words belies the power of the message of the kingdom. We may not always understand every word he speaks but we continue to be inspired to draw closer to him day by day.

There is in fact a sixth parable hidden away in the final verse of our reading, and it's a challenge to all preachers: Jesus says (v52) "every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old". Each time we hear God's word preached may we experience the joy of discovering new treasures as well as rediscovering old ones.

In Jesus' name. Amen.