

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, St Bartholomew's HOMILY

There are two ways of finding things. One is to come upon them by accident. You might be cleaning the house and suddenly you find something you'd given up looking for. Or you might find something valuable in the street and pick it up and take it to the police station - money or jewellery. If it's unclaimed it becomes yours. The other way of finding is when you set out deliberately to look for something. You might be a collector who looks for rare stamps or ancient coins or antiques. In that case, what you find is not by accident. You've done everything you could to find it - all the effort needed, all of it focussed on that one thing you want.

That in essence reflects the first two parables in our Gospel reading from St Matthew. It's part of a chapter given over mainly to parables. In fact it's the third of Matthew's five discourses that occur throughout his Gospel showing Jesus teaching about the kingdom of heaven. Because Jesus in Matthew's Gospel is very much a teacher – a teacher in the tradition of Moses who gave the people God's law in five books. Matthew sets out that same law as interpreted and lived out by Jesus in his five discourses across the Gospel.

So the first of our parables pictures a man, probably a labourer, digging up a field who finds, to his astonishment, a cache of buried treasure. So he goes off and sells all his possessions and buys the field and becomes wealthy. In the second parable, we find a merchant who is a collector of pearls. In the ancient world pearls were not cultured pearls, as most are today, but rather came directly from oyster beds. They were extremely valuable and the Romans themselves were obsessed with them. Indeed, Julius Caesar passed a law that only the upper classes could wear pearls. Their beauty and lustre reminded people of the moon and they were associated with royalty and divine power. So it's not unusual to find a merchant who is seeking the most beautiful pearl he can find. And when he finds it, he sells everything he owns to buy it

Two stories of finding: one accidental and one deliberate. Very different stories except the one thing they have in common: the action. Both are prepared to act immediately: sell, to surrender, everything else in order to gain the treasure.

So what is Jesus saying here about the kingdom of heaven which is what parables are about? And what does he mean by the 'kingdom'? We tend to think of the kingdom as a place or a domain but in fact it refers to the rule of God, the sovereign reign of God. It's not about a place so much as a divine activity. The kingdom of God is God's ruling activity which is already a reality in heaven but we pray that it may become true also on earth: 'your kingdom come ... on earth as in heaven.' When God rules, people are set free from the burdens that weigh them down, they are healed and made whole, forgiven; they are set free from narrow legalism and life-denying laws. When God rules people find peace and justice. These are the signs of the kingdom of heaven, God's rule within us and among us and in our world.

So, to return to our two parables: they are about finding the kingdom of heaven. People may belong in either group — they might be among those who accidentally come across the kingdom. I met two women last Sunday, refugees from Papua New Guinea, who are living in a house provided for them rent free by a Catholic religious order of sisters. For the two women it must have seemed like finding the kingdom of heaven in a strange land where they possess nothing at all. Any act of kindness can make the kingdom suddenly appear. Or people may be in the other category: those who are seeking out meaning, who are working for justice, who are longing for peace and struggling to make it happen. When they find it, even in a small way, it's not an accidental finding but a conscious search for the kingdom that has been rewarded.

Either way it doesn't really matter. But how it affects us is much the same. We're called to make the kingdom of heaven our priority, to give up everything else in order to find it, to attain it, to hold onto it. 'Seek first the kingdom of God', Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. 'Where your treasure is there will your heart be also'. So it's about following our deepest hearts' desires and making that kingdom a

priority in our lives, giving our all to live by it: to stand always in the realm of God's gracious, liberating rule. We find the kingdom in giving ourselves to others. But it's also for us. We're not required to end up exhausted in labouring for the well-being of others, and letting our own needs slide. The kingdom of heaven belongs to us all: its gracious rule is for others and for us and for the whole creation.

Origen of Alexandria who lived in the third century was perhaps the first to speak of Christ himself as the pearl of great price. And that is a beautiful thought, well worth meditating upon. The image expresses something of the beauty and uniqueness of Christ, his glory and mercy, how precious he is to us, as he is to the Father: the beloved Son, our beloved brother & Lord.

But the opposite is also and equally true. That we are the treasure for Christ, that we are the pearl of great price, and that God in Christ gave up everything in order to seek us out, to find us and to pour upon us his grace and freedom, his goodness and love.

St Paul describes that divine love as more beautiful yet also stronger than any force in heaven or earth. 'Neither height nor depth nor any other creature can separate us from that love' once we have grasped it — or, better still, once it has grasped us. It will never let us go, no matter what we go through in our lives, no matter what we suffer. God's love is always there, always stronger and will never abandon us.

So Christ for us is the pearl of great price, the treasure above all others, the one we seek out and hold as the centre of our lives. But we ourselves also are his pearl, his treasure, and he's shown himself willing to pay the price.

Mthr Dorothy