

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost (26 July 2020)**Lectionary Reading:** Matthew 13.44-58

This morning we have the final set of readings centred on the parables of the Kingdom from Matthew chapter 13. Not recorded in the writings of Mark or Luke, the three parables we have just heard are unique to Matthew. While the first two parables are closely linked in meaning but with slight differences, the third is similar to last week's parable of the

As far back as I can remember, I have been fascinated with the idea of finding hidden treasure. A fascination that was reinforced by reading such books as *Treasure Island* and *The Treasure Hunters* as a young girl. It was hard not have had one's imagination excited by these tales! Indeed, the treasure map and the buried treasure have intrigued the minds and spirits of men and women for centuries. X marks the spot of untold wealth! If only someone could find it!

Imagine you're busy with a routine inspection through a mine in the early 1900's when something shiny catches your eye. You look over only to discover that the shiny object is indeed a diamond as large as your fist. Well, this is what happened to the superintendent, Frederick Wells when he was walking through the Premier Mine in South Africa on 26 January 1905. During his routine inspection Frederick unexpectedly discovered the Cullinan diamond, the world's biggest diamond weighing in at a whopping 3 106 carats. This man stumbled on quite a treasure.

Others find treasures searching for them in sunken ships in the ocean-beds of the world, and sometimes they make a great find. With their metal detectors

and spades “detectorists” are a common sight in the British countryside. The region of East Anglia where we used to live has been the setting of many a huge treasure hoard over the years, and although everything that is declared a treasure officially belongs to the Queen, the finders are entitled to a reward.

Whether it is finding actual buried treasure or dreaming of winning millions on the lottery, there is nothing more exciting than suddenly coming into the possession of a fortune in one way or another....

This sort of thing happened in Jesus' day and He gave us two examples.

In the first, Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven was like a treasure in a field which a man stumbled upon and covered up...then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and goes and buys that field and takes possession of that treasure for himself.

Jesus' listeners could easily relate to this parable. In our day, we can store valuables in the bank or in a safe deposit box. But in Jesus' time, valuables, such as coins or jewels, were often hidden in a jar in the earth; common practice in a climate of uncertainty and oppression. We can see this practice clearly in another of Jesus' parables (Matt 25:25), the parable of the talents, when one of the men, given some of the master's money, buried it. Burying a treasure was the most secure way of protecting it. If it were skilfully hidden it would rarely be detected. People often died however without disclosing the location of the treasure to a relative. In that case, a hoard of coins or jewels buried in a pottery jar might be discovered that would make its finder rich.

Some have questioned the ethics of the man's purchase of the field without disclosing the treasure. But in regard to hidden treasure Jewish Rabbinic law was quite clear, the man who found the treasure hidden in the field had the right to keep what he had found. A dishonest man would never have purchased the field -- he would have just kept the treasure and not said anything.

This parable explains several aspects of the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus: First, it reveals the kingdom as something exciting and valuable. Second, it's significant that the treasure is something hidden – found by some, but not visible to all. And third, there's the thought of giving up everything for the sake of the kingdom. But, the real the point of the parable lies in both the joy that's experienced in 'finding' the kingdom of heaven and a willingness to give up everything for it. One thing we should note is that it's wrong to describe this 'giving up' as a sacrifice – the man actually sold from self interest in order to obtain something far greater. We, too, are able to experience great joy ourselves in finding the kingdom of heaven, that is, in a relationship with Jesus who brings it to our attention through the Holy Spirit ...

Jesus' point in the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price is similar to the Parable of the Hidden Treasure. Pearls were highly valued in ancient times. This was before the time of cultured pearls, so pearls were not plentiful. They were regarded as precious stones in antiquity, taken by divers from the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean. Pearls were used for necklaces and other ornaments, and could be extremely costly, so the word "pearl" came to be a figure of speech for something of supreme worth. Ancient literature tells of pearls worth millions of dollars.

The man who was in the business of selling pearls is on the lookout for the “pearl of great price”. He knows it must exist and he uses all his energies to find it, and when he does he too sells everything he has to purchase that pearl. He spares nothing to make it his own.

Both these psalms are significant in that they have two obvious features in common -- finding something tremendously valuable and, the thought of selling up everything to get it. Of course, and it's important to say, the kingdom is not something that can be bought. But what these parables do make clear is that in calling us to follow Jesus and to give up ourselves, and our old lives for the kingdom, Jesus is calling us to a priceless gain, and with great joy...!

So, what is the kingdom of heaven like? If we scan back over the Gospel of Matthew we can see the nature of this kingdom, the constitution of which is given in Jesus' sermon on the mount. It is about the way of blessedness, it is about peace, it is about justice, it is about The Golden Rule in its emphatically positive form: 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you'. We see that it is the way of wisdom, we see that it is the way of rest, and the way of hope.

The Kingdom is about the way life should be, both the way we should live it now and the life we were created for in the future. Not everyone may see the value of the Kingdom but we should not doubt it!

The question then should not be are we willing to sell all, but rather do we realise just how wonderful and great is the Kingdom of Heaven of which Jesus is speaking. If we understand this then whatever we may have to give up for it we will do so joyfully.

The lesson of the parable of the 'the great dragnet' is similar to that of the weeds growing up with the wheat, which we heard last week. Not everything growing in a field is wheat; not everything caught in a dragnet is an edible fish. Some will reject or oppose the kingdom of God, not everyone will see that judging between one and the other is not our business, the sorting out is the work of God in his own good time. Judgment is 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.

The Lord be with you.