

20140727SeventhAfterPentecostSermon

Jesus starts each of his parables this morning with the words “The Kingdom of Heaven is like ...” There are five parables in the pericope we read as our gospel this morning. Each of them, needless to say, is worthy of a sermon on its own. But perhaps what we need to do is see what they might mean for us today.

Let us explore the parable of the pearl of great value and the treasure found in the field. These two just demonstrate to us that people can find the kingdom in different ways. For the merchant, the find was no accident, but the result of a lifetime of diligent trading and the developing an eye for perfection when it came to pearls. The treasure in the field, on the other hand, is most likely found by a labourer, clearly by accident. What does this mean? Well, Jesus said the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant who found a pearl of great value after rejecting many other pearls. If the treasure found by accident in that field contained a number of pearls, some may well be rejected by the merchant. So what it is saying is that we each discover the Kingdom of God in different ways, ways that suit our character, our personalities – of great value to one person not so perfect value to another. And who is to say which has the greater value?

The merchant might well begrudge the accidental find of the labourer and the labourer begrudge the wealth of the merchant able to afford to buy the one fine pearl - but the fact that the parables are put side by side shows us that neither is the better way. The fact that the parables are put together, side by side, actually puts the people together, side by side. Each has to acknowledge the existence of the other and the reality of their different perspectives on life and faith.

Today throughout the world and even in South Africa there is multitude of Christian denominations that believe that their's is the only way, blithely ignoring the fact that there are thousands and thousands of different denominations that believe they also are 'the only way.'

Some preachers claim that what God has revealed the Scriptures is the only way of salvation and they believe that those who say otherwise are deluded. These preachers might believe that there is only one plan for redemption in the bible, and that plan is all about sin being forgiven by Jesus' death on the Cross. Of course a gay people are sinners and therefore, if they wish to be saved they must commit themselves to lifelong celibacy! How convenient this is, for it avoids all the passages in the New Testament about acceptance, forgiveness and love for the other.

These preachers, along with the thousands and thousands of other 'Christian' leaders refuse to acknowledge the existence of others and the reality of other's different perspectives on life and faith. Any faith conversations with others will essentially be one-way - preaching at .. rather than dialogue with .. They are not having a real conversation at all – not listening to the other at all.

The pearl and the treasure in the field show the breadth of God's mercy, the multiplicity of different ways to include all people – the lifelong seeker and the chance discoverer. Indeed it is the multiplicity of different ways of accepting and including all people that is the real pearl, the real treasure.

While the denominations and ministers continue to preach at others, proclaiming the rightness of their particular way and the wrongness of every other way, they are failing to perceive the real treasure, the real pearl – the diversity of God's creation. Denominations and religions are particularly fond of lauding life-long study of scripture, replicating the devotion of the merchant, but failing to see that others accidentally chance upon grace, independent of study and devotion.

In fact, throughout the bible the usually accepted precedence of the first-born is subverted and the younger is preferred, as in the Jacob cycle of stories in Genesis, part of which we heard this morning. This seems to be saying – as I said two weeks ago as well, that we have to ensure that the old way of doing things is the way God wants us to do things. Perhaps we have to be open to embrace new ways. It means that God always has more for each and every generation, which implicitly implies that any sacred scripture will be inadequate to deal with a continuously evolving scientific understanding of reality. I'm not saying that sacred scripture has to be abandoned but it has to be re-examined re-interpreted in the light of these new scientific discoveries. It means that there is always something new, always something surprising to discover, sometimes by deliberate and pain-staking searching, - like that pearl of great value and sometimes chanced upon accidentally – like the treasure in the field.

Christians believe that their new faith has supplanted the ancient faith of Israel but its arrival is foreshadowed time and again in the Old Testament. So the 'Christian' faith developed on an evolving understanding of God, but now so often the so-called 'Christianity' of some churches has become stuck in a somewhat ancient language and thought form.

The other parables in our gospel for today talk about the very earthly character of the kingdom. The mustard seed needs to be planted in the soil, it has to become dirty. The flour needs to be contaminated with the yeast until it is all leavened. Both of these speak about an existence almost the precise opposite of going to church. Indeed the kingdom is more likely when we leave worship, divest ourselves of our finery, put on our overalls and get our hands dirty in our secular work.

You know, as I thought about those five parables again I realised that finding of the exquisite pearl or the treasure, the seed being planted or the flour being leavened don't actually contribute much to others. None of these is especially community-oriented. Through them poverty is not eliminated because one merchant or one labourer find their treasure. Racism and discrimination are not confronted, the world is no better place because the mustard seed has grown and the flour has been leavened. These parables merely describe life as it is, not a fantasy of some superhero or holy saint. They are not the achievements of hermits and the devout. In these parables Jesus describes real people, living real lives as they really are, and finding in life that which sustains rather than that which diminishes. We do not have to change the world into **our** image and likeness, we are called to live and let live.

Both the merchant and the labourer immediately recognise the value of their finds. Sometimes we do not value our day to day tasks and activities until we can't do them anymore. People find affirmation in a vast variety of ways - in intimacy, nature, art, music, fantasy, social action, sport, ritual, community, creativity, helping, the list is endless. Each and every one of these is of God. These things normal life doing things sustain us over a lifetime. It is when the affirmation we get is at the expense of someone else's affirmation then it is likely to be short lived and it is not of God. If we thank God that we are not like other people: 'thieves, rogues, adulterers', female, person of colour, not straight ... even if we were able to claim: 'I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income' others will not be affirmed and included, and society will be fragmented rather than unified. A society that is fragmented cannot be anything different from what we have right now and we want that to be different. For while the rich get richer, the orthodox condemn the questioner, the devout dismiss those who aren't, the straight deny the integrity of those who are gay - there will always be others who are expendable, those whose perceptions, beliefs and feelings don't count for anything.

So often we hear disparaging comments about capitalism - that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and more recently that capitalism assumes that wealth 'trickles down' to the workers. I wonder if there is any difference in the church when we look at spiritual riches. When will the spiritually poor, those on the margins, the fringes: when will their existence be acknowledged let alone valued by the church? When will some of the blessings of orthodoxy 'trickle down' to these others?

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said: 'We should really genuflect before one another. Buddhists are more correct, since they bow profoundly as they greet one another, saying the God in me acknowledges the God in you.' People, all people, are meant to be gifts one to another, and the saddest of people are those who are alone.

God wants us to find the treasures that are put all around us, there are really so many it's hard to pick which is best. These treasures are the people of our community, all people not just the ones we like or who are like us. You see, we are meant for one another, for community and for joy.

Based on a sermon by Christopher Heath-<http://frsparky.net>