

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 17 Year A 2017

This past week I fulfilled part of my diocesan duty and attended the diocesan clergy conference: Missional Leadership in the 21st Century. There were some good and helpful things that came of it. And there were some things – the worship included – that had me thinking, my golly, what a great treasure we have here; what a pearl of great price we possess! It is part of my hope that as we move forward and look toward the future, the unique treasure we are custodians of will be less hidden; that the life and tradition and spirituality of this place will indeed be valued and appreciated for the precious thing that it is; that in the vast scope of God's reign in our small corner of God's earth, we might take our rightful place.

But as we rightly claim our treasure, we have to be careful about what we assert our treasure as. In the terms of the parables placed before us today, the treasure, the pearl of great price is identified as the Kingdom – the reign of God. The hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, then - as we might identify and experience them - only have value in as much as they further and are authentic expressions of the reign of God. Every age and every church needs to take care in what they think is the reign of God. We need to take care that our message and proclamation are not confused with some sort of programme of social reform, or social utopia, or a political ideology, or creating polite, well -behaved citizens, or even the imparting of values. That is not the Good News of the Kingdom. The reign of God cannot be reduced to these things. And as I suggested a couple of weeks ago, we can invest an awful lot of time and money and effort in what we think is God's work, but really just a waste of time.

So often in the life of faith what we think is really important, even essential, is secondary or incidental. So often in the life of faith we get caught up on the details and fail to see the vast, expansive work God is seeking to accomplish through Jesus Christ. It can mean that in our attachment to incidentals we can actually sabotage and undermine God's reign. It can mean that what we think is a treasure is in fact a mere trinket. What we think a priceless pearl, really just a cheap imitation.

If there is a tragedy in the life of the church it is that so often these trinkets and imitations become ends in themselves: the priceless treasure of the kingdom is exchanged for a golden calf. As a church - as men and women who seek to follow the Lord Jesus - none of what we do, nothing we believe none of what we claim to be – will be of any value if it does not further the reign of God as revealed to us in Christ Jesus. If we assert certain things above this, then we have made an idol of them. As the history of Israel tells us, God has little tolerance for false gods.

If there is a tragedy in the church it is that we have exchanged the good news of the kingdom for cheap imitation. If there is a crisis in the church today it is a crisis of confidence. The first two parables we encounter today remind us of the immense confidence the reign of God should inspire in us. The stories tell us how they perceive such value in what they have discovered that they will sell all, so they can possess it. Nothing will stand in their way. They surely remind also of the costliness of possessing this treasure. It doesn't come cheaply for either of them. But having recognised the true worth of what they had discovered, knew they had to take all measures to secure them. They acted with boldness; confidence. Their very futures, their very lives depended on it.

All of us know, and only too well, the struggle to live the life of faith, with integrity, sincerity and boldness. We all struggle against our own personal weakness. We struggle against all those forces that press hard against us. We know how readily faith is dismissed. We might keenly value the treasure we possess. But we also know how few do. We know the pain that what we so value, and seek to cherish, maintain and celebrate, others see as worthless junk. We can lose confidence in the worth of the faith we hold. It is easy to despair and to feel the weight of all the pressure. We may be tempted to concede to the idea that faith and religious practice is incompatible with the modern world. We buy into the idea that the only acceptable place for faith and religious conviction is as a private, withdrawn, defensive eccentricity. We might find the treasure, but think the best thing to do is keep it to ourselves. Yes, it is easy to slip into despair. And worse, it's contiguous!! But, it has no place – *no place!* – in the life of the church and the life of faith.

It is good, then, to hold before us the image of the boundless confidence and enthusiasm, the irrepressible joy of the figures in the gospels today. We should note their joy and excitement at their discovery. The degree to which they were willing to go to secure their wondrous discoveries. This confidence is further reflected in the epistle reading. St Paul emphatically declares, *if God is for us, who can be against us?* Of course, the good news of God in Jesus Christ is not a matter *if* God is for us, because God *is* for us!! God is with us and for us and interested and involved and present to us. Despair has no place in the life of the Christian because it denies God's revealed truth in Jesus Christ: *if God is for us, who can be against us?*

That's means we can be bold, we can be confident. Indeed, we ought to be. And we do not merely possess a treasure. We are called upon to proclaim it. In the gospel portion today Matthew suggests how this bold proclamation might work. It's easy to miss, especially after that bit about a furnace of fire and weeping and gnashing of teeth. But here's the important bit: *therefore every scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out his treasure what is new and what is old. What is new and what is old....* Matthew confounds the notion that the life of faith is a novelty, that it is something we constantly have to reinvent with every passing fad and fashion. He challenges our suspicion of the past, so rife in the world we inhabit. Rather he says to us that the follower of Jesus enjoys a faith shaped and informed by the past, but in conversation with the present. All that is good and true and noble from the past we bring into our experience of 'the now'. Faith is not some dead relic of history but living and dynamic. We can face the future with confidence, because we are anchored in the faith of the saints, and the foundation of the apostles. We *do* have treasure here in this place, amongst these people. Now, we have to be sure we have not made idols of certain things, certain ideas, certain practices, or settled for a cheap imitation. But if we are convinced that here is indeed is an authentic expression of God's reign then we must be willing to pay the price. If here is a treasure worth possessing we must allow it to so capture our heart that it defines the essence of our identity. God, ever true to his promise, is with us and for us. With *confidence*, let us lay claim to the treasure he gives. Amen.