

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 13:44-52

Jesus said to his disciples,

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

REFLECTION 1:

WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS

Imagine that you have just won the lottery. Imagine unearthing a large metal box full of coins while digging in your garden. Imagine falling asleep and seeing God in a dream offering anything you wish for. Stories of buried treasure, and sudden wealth is among most of the world's great stories – Aesop's fables, Hans Christian Andersen and Grimm's fairy tales are the stuff of our childhood dreams. The very thought of sudden wealth quickens the pulse and poses the question, 'would all our troubles be over if we were rich? Would doors be open to a new future?' Wealth is just another form of power and having power increases our options and yet complicates our lives. It can induce laziness, make us avaricious and wanting more can become an obsession.

We quickly learn among other popular sayings that money cannot buy happiness or make us a better person. Jesus compares the kingdom of God to finding a treasure or discovering a pearl of great price, but he was not describing earthly wealth or power. He stirred imaginations as the first step towards understanding that true happiness is found only in right relationships with God and with one another. God was pleased when Solomon asked for wisdom for this showed he was already wise and would make a good leader. Jesus appealed to the spiritual seekers in the crowd who already knew that finding God brings every other gift and that life without God, even with wealth and power, would be empty and pointless. Fr McVerry reminds us that our unjust world creates poverty, insecurity and competition, which drive many to pursue wealth as the only answer to every problem. The kingdom of God comes not just as a gift but also as an invitation to follow Jesus. Possessing the true treasure of God's love enables us to give ourselves freely to serving those in need and challenging power and wealth when it deprives others of justice and causes suffering.

Life is short and most of us get one chance to discover what will make us truly happy. The Gospel offers a path that often seems paradoxical, that to find our life is to lose it, that only love given away freely comes back to us in joy – that seeking first the will of God is the secret of finding everything else as well.

The testimony of those in nursing homes or on their deathbeds affirms the truth that peace and happiness comes to those who develop and use their gifts to serve others. Wisdom is to know this early in life and to apply it to our choices day by day. The direction we set will determine the outcome of our journey. Jesus would say, 'Blessed are they who find the treasure of God's love and spend their lives giving it away to others'.

REFLECTION 2:

FISHING TIME

'Do you understand these things'? Do you understand what the parables of the kingdom mean? This question, put by Jesus to the disciples around him when he told and explained his parables, is today addressed to us. Would we dare to answer yes with the same assurance that the Lord's first hearers had? But, actually, what sort of understanding is meant here? How are we to acquire it?

The seven parables that the liturgy has chosen for us over the past few weeks have as their subject the mystery of the kingdom of heaven. To 'understand all these things' is not a question of human intelligence – those with a high I.Q., the brainy ones – but of spiritual intelligence – that of the humble and lowly, to whom God gives to understand 'the mystery hidden from past ages' and to act accordingly.

We can understand the parables and put their teaching into practice only in the light of the Spirit, in prayer; they teach us a way. The disciples drew near to Jesus to receive from him the explanation of the parables. Only by being familiar with the one who spoke the parables can we probe their meaning. Matthew who collected the teachings of the scriptures and of Jesus showed its timelessness for the Christian community of his time. The Gospel is the good news announced for today. We must announce the message in the 'todayness' of the kingdom and learn to profit with wisdom, from all that happens to us.

There are two parables offered for our consideration in today's Gospel. The first is about claiming treasure discovered in a field and the other is about a net filled with good and bad fish. Let us focus on the second parable – the fishing story. In the crowds Jesus drew there were all kinds of people. Nobody could exactly say what their motivations and intentions were or distinguish the good from the bad. It is true that Jesus could have sorted them out, and certain people thought that the Messiah, upon coming, would set the good people apart and condemn the others. Even John the Baptist seemed to have found it difficult to accept that Jesus was not making such a judgement. He described the one more powerful than he who was coming after him who would 'clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn' (Matt 3:12). Yes, the judgement will come in due course and the son of Man will execute it. But Jesus does not forestall that day, known only to the Father. Remember how Jesus chided James and John who wanted to have the inhospitable inhabitants of a Samaritan village chastised on the spot (Luke 51). We must remember this – the present is fishing time and the net collects fish of every kind. The sorting out will take place on the shore – then only. This delay presents an opportunity for each of us.

The parables in the Gospel of St. Matthew, although rich in meaning are given in simple and familiar form – accessible to all, especially to those who live closely to the daily realities they experience – here is a language we understand!