



*The new*SHOFAR

Ordinary Sunday 17

1 Kings 3:5-14; Matthew 13:44-52 - *Make room for God!*

The Kingdom of Heaven should be a genuine treasure for us

These short parables tell us how the *joy* the men have from the treasure/pearl is greater than the sacrifices that are demanded – and it is here that Matthew is placing his focus. If the *joy* of the treasure/pearl is so great, then the selling off of possessions will not truly be a sacrifice. Neither men have lost much of lasting value, just removed clutter from their lives. As St Paul says, discovering Jesus in life is greater than *all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* (Colossians 2:3). That's today's question for us: *Is faith all that important for us?*

One of the surprises in the parable is that neither the treasure nor the pearl had been found earlier. Presumably many people had walked past the field and yet had not found the treasure. It was there all the time but had remained hidden. The same with the pearl. Someone must have found it and brought it to the market. Other traders had passed it over without appreciating its true value. Its value had been there all the time but it had not been appreciated. The man and the merchant were men who were out looking for treasure, searching for the pearl. This is important. Treasures rarely land in our laps, just as the Kingdom does not take over our lives without an invitation. One of the important realities is the reaction of the men having found the valuable object for which they had been searching. They had to act. They had to recognize its value. They then had to go and rearrange the whole of their lives in order to possess it.

Reaping Kingdom rewards requires a rearranging of life priorities

There are no details about just what the men gave up. The emphasis remains focused on the *joy* that they are to obtain. This is where we find another link with discipleship and the kingdom. The key to the parable is not the sacrifices needed in order to live as a disciple, to rejoice in the value of a life lived under the Rule of God. Matthew is reminding his own Church about the abundance of blessings that come as people choose Kingdom living over the other options open to men and women.

In the name of God: Be filled with Joy in Christ!

The philosopher Nietzsche once famously observed: *If Christians would seem to me to be more saved than they are I might believe in their Saviour.* As men and women of The Way, it is this divine *joy* that becomes our most potent and powerful tool for evangelism and mission. The world will not come to know Christ through our insisting on laws or through philosophically sound arguments. They will come to Christ if in us they find the *joy* and peace that comes from God. If God is our true and lasting treasure, a pearl beyond all else in our lives, then those riches will be taken up by others through the way we live in the world. It is when Kingdom living transforms our lives for the good that others may come to believe. If we experience the depth of *joy* that comes from living in God's presence, then selling "everything" will seem like a much simpler demand. Would we be willing to get rid of the more "me", the more self-serving elements in our lives if we truly believed that living the Gospel in a more faithful manner would bring about a transformation of the world? For the better? Well, this is the promise given in the parables. It is not about reducing ourselves to poverty but it is about accepting there is more to life than we build for ourselves and by ourselves. It is about living in the understanding we need God and God wants us.

Don't be fooled and do not let our preferences blind us to reality

The reality being stressed in the parable of the dragnet is the certainty of an End time judgment. In earlier generations of believers, there had been a great emphasis on rewards and punishments. People lived good lives in order to avoid hell and in the hope of getting to heaven. What drove lifestyles was the fear of eternal fires. In more contemporary times, there has been a tendency to go the other way, to forget all about the possibility of hell fires, almost to the point where God would be sending no one to eternal punishment. *If there was a hell*, observed one commentator, *there was no one in it*. What Jesus is teaching here is that there will be an End time separation of the good from the bad and the separation will be on what is morally “good” and morally “bad” as spelled out in His Sermon on the Mount. The “good” will be rewarded and the “bad” will be cast out *into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*.

Keep our eyes on Jesus and not the final judgment

Jesus is not seeking to create an atmosphere of fear and anxiety so that reward and punishment become the key elements of a Gospel life. Jesus is telling his disciples a number of things. The first is that the Church (local and universal) will always have a mixture of good and bad within its communities. It will never just be a haven for saints. It is a mixed community and more importantly, will be a mixed community through until the End. Having sinners in the Church does not mean that the Gospel has failed. It just means that people will forever exercise their freedom and resist the invitations from God to share life under his rule.

The other point he is making is that the presence of sinners should not occupy the bulk of our time, our energies and our resources. Our priority must always be the work of mission – we are to be *fishers of men and women* with every man and woman on earth our target catch. We must not concentrate on the sinners and the unrighteous but concentrate instead on living the Gospel, on giving witness to the person, words and ministry of Jesus and leave the judgment to God. The work of judging (ourselves and others) is best left to God, for men and women will not have the same love, mercy and compassion that comes from the Divine Judge.

The Church is not the Kingdom of God – it must give witness to the Kingdom

In this parable, Jesus is talking about the net in terms of the Kingdom. He is not talking about the Church. The Kingdom is far wider than that and so he is here including in the parable believers and non-believers alike. It presumes some universal and basic measurements of what is “good” and “bad” that apply to all (though Jesus does not spell it out in details here) and so the parable shifts the gaze of God from just believers to include all on earth. It is a universal judgment and so the Gospel is meant to be taken out to all peoples.

The other detail of importance here is that everyone has a place in the net that is the Kingdom. We are worthy because of Jesus. It is through his merits that we have a home in the kingdom and not because of our own goodness. We will always fail to reach the level of being perfect in all things but that does not exclude us from the blessings of Kingdom living. We might all want to believe in a gradual growth towards perfection but life is not like that. We sin. We fail. We compromise our discipleship and we are forever putting off the demands of renewal, repentance and the imitation of Christ. Despite all of this, our home remains the Kingdom. The greater our failures the greater the grace of God is at work. The more we struggle for perfection, the more God is inviting us to take hold of his grace and his strength. No sin can keep us from living in the Kingdom. “Forget heaven” says Jesus. “Forget hell” says Jesus. Keep the focus of discipleship on following him and leave the rest to God. “Take comfort” says Jesus, for there is room in the Kingdom for everyone, for God understands our weaknesses and loves us dearly - despite our failings.