

July 26, 2020
17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kings 3:5, 7-12
Psalm 119:57, 72, 76-77, 127-128, 129-130
Romans 8:28-30
Matthew 13:44-52

For the last few weeks we have been talking about investing wisely in the Kingdom of God. The disciples had approached Jesus and asked, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” He said to them in reply, “Because knowledge of the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted. To anyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away.

So then jumping right into the fray, the question you and I need to ask is, have I received adequate knowledge concerning the mysteries of God? The answer to this question is important because not only will he who has less lose his reward, but in addition he or she may even be found to be unworthy and cast into the furnace to be burned where there will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. Indeed, not a pretty picture.

In today’s Gospel reading we find Jesus once again instructing the people with three more short parables concerning the kingdom of heaven. Hence, the three parables mentioned today in Matthew’s Gospel mark the conclusion of Jesus’ parabolic teaching.

The first lesson describes a man who finds a treasure buried in a field. Upon finding it, he buries it again, sells all that he has, and then goes back and buys the field. Whether gold or silver, jewels or coinage, or maybe even water hidden below the ground’s surface, whatever the discovered treasure was, the fact remains - *He seriously wanted it.*

As a side note, Jewish tradition normally held that monetary treasures belonged to the finder; hence the reason the property had to be purchased so that he could have the hidden secret riches.

The second teaching describes a merchant who searched for fine pearls. Having found the finest pearl he had ever seen he too sold all that he had and bought that one single pearl. This man had evidently searched high and low for the very best. He knew what he was looking for and when he found it, he was determined that it would be his.

These first two parables remind us that the Kingdom of Heaven will cost us – as they say – it will cost us big time. Oh, the gift of redemption and eternal life is truly indeed a free gift, Jesus paid the whole price with His life; but to fully engage in the benefits of the Kingdom is another story; to be fully engaged will cost us our lives as well. Needless to say those who find great treasures, if they want to keep them, must be willing to pay dearly.

The Aramaic Bible in Plain English states, “From the days of [John] The Baptizer until this hour the Kingdom of Heaven is led by force and the violent are seizing it” (Matthew 11:12).

Here 4th - 5th Century Early Church Father Saint John Chrysostom commented, “The violent who take the kingdom by force are those who have such earnest desire for Christ that they let nothing stand between themselves and faith in Him.”

In other words, if you really want what God has to offer in the Kingdom you will have to fight for it. Does that mean we will have to take up arms or become radical zealots? No, it means that we

will have to go to war opposing our own selfish passions. By passions I mean our carnal nature and/or our desire for temporary earthly materialism and emotional pleasures. Really? Yes really.

The third and final parable is very similar in context to last week's parable concerning tares and wheat growing together in the same field. Here the fishermen gathered in their nets, nets holding both eatable and non-eatable fish. The good fish will be preserved and eaten or sold at market and the bad fish will be cast out, or possibly used for fertilizer.

Jesus then likened this parable with the end of the age where both the righteous and unrighteous will be gathered in, adjudicated, and either rewarded or sent away to the fiery furnace.

In summary, and as mentioned last week, all of these parables in some way or another describe the inner mechanics of the kingdom of heaven. So let's stop for a minute to consider the spiritual warfare and/or violence associated with the Kingdom of Heaven.

In our first OT reading Solomon asked the Lord God for wisdom. In ancient times wisdom was recognized and accompanied by the presence of prosperity and peace and security; needless to say, Solomon received four gifts for the cause of one. Because it was God's grace that gave Solomon the gift of his asking, Solomon was blessed to discover several key principles useful in activating God's kingdom dynamics.

Here are a few key points. The Book of Kings records that Solomon humbly acknowledged his human weakness; thereafter, he simply and sincerely asked for God's mercy. In addition, it is

important to note that he asked God for an understanding heart. In Jewish tradition an understanding heart was known as a listening and/or an obedient heart.

Sound familiar; remember what Jesus said of Isaiah's prophecy? "You shall indeed hear but not understand, you shall indeed look but never see But blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears because they hear." Indeed these requests were graciously granted to Solomon who the Bible indicates was unsurpassed in wisdom and governmental abilities.

Solomon asked for wisdom and it was granted, but what was the nature or specifics of the wisdom he possessed, what did it consist of? To answer that question, it would be reasonable to assume that he understood the inner mechanics of the Law in the Kingdom of Heaven, and therefore he was able govern the people and give understanding to the simple?

Subsequently, it would also be reasonable to suggest that the wisdom found in the Law could be likened to the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price. How so, some may ask?

The pre-selected Psalm for today lends credence to this hypothesis in describing the merits of the Law. The Psalmist emphatically proclaims that he loves the Law; to him it is more precious than thousands of pieces of gold and silver. He goes on to say, it is precious to him because it brings the compassion of the Lord so that he might live.

Some biblical scholars suggest that the treasure and/or the pearl mentioned in the parables might indeed be Jesus the Christ. In

this case the Law could be likened to a special map leading to the discovery of the hidden treasure in the soon coming Messiah. But what is really interesting, and a profound mystery is the fact that Jesus said, the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God, you will hear it mentioned both ways depending on the audience, is within you, see Luke 17:20-21.

It would be several years later that St. Paul would explain, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17), all gifts king Solomon acquired in his humility. Therefore, all this information the Law, the OT prophesies, the parables, the miraculous life of Jesus when taken together provides irrefutable evidence that Jesus is the wellspring of the Kingdom of Heaven.

For the past three weeks we have been reviewing the parables of Jesus found in the Book of Mathew. So before we close let us do a quick review? Last week's Gospel reading concluded with the statement, "Whoever has ears ought to hear." This week's Gospel reading ends with Jesus asking the question, "Do you understand all these things?" The disciples answered, "Yes." But what say we?

In a nutshell Jesus was talking to whosoever has ears to hear. And then if you hear, He asks, do you understand? Finally to understand means to eventually do.

First of all, do we fully understand that kingdom living demands a complete sellout to the King? Jesus, who is the sower, deposits the seed of truth into the hearts of all men. What grows there will depend on the condition of the soil of the individual heart.

The seed, even though initially small, and possibly even deposited in a somewhat hostile environments, can be wasted if it is not prayerfully cultivated; yet, it is likened to yeast in bread dough, it will spread and infiltrate because it has the capacity to grow rapidly and thereby provide peace and security for the multitudes it encounters.

On one hand the kingdom is discovered as if one wondrously found a treasure, and yet on the other hand it is to be sought after as if one was looking for priceless pearls. When discovered the kingdom requires forsaking all in order to possess all, and thereafter it's possession brings about great joy and fulfillment.

Governed by the natural laws of harvest, people - like vegetable crops - take time to grow; and like seed, people can become spiritually sterile as a consequence of not being washed, broken, pollinated and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes looking exactly alike, both good and bad vessels must continue to grow together until the final harvest where there will be an ingathering and final separation. Scripture speaks woe to those who have squandered their opportunity, because at the call of the heavenly Master the nets will be drawn and there will be no escape from the pending scrutiny. Similar to the fish brought up in the net each person will be scrutinized and judged accordingly. Here we recall that Jesus said, Follow Me; I will make you fishers of men.

So there we have it, a short synopsis of all seven parables. However there is one more point we haven't covered yet.

When Jesus finished His parabolic teaching He concluded with these words, "Do you understand these things?" They answered yes. Then He said, "Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old."

So then, how are we to understand this last statement? Jesus mentioned scribes who have been instructed in the kingdom of heaven. The scribes were held in great awe and respect throughout and within the Jewish world. Like the prophets of old, they were thought to possess vast, secret knowledge of the workings of the Lord's power. In many ways they might even be viewed as the legitimate heirs of the prophetic tradition.

One had to study long and hard under strict tutelage to become a scribe and then you were not formally recognized until you at least reached the age of forty. So it is possible here that Jesus purposed to address those who were teachers or leaders.

Possibly there were Jewish scribes present in the audience whom Jesus wanted to reach; others surmise that Jesus was talking to His disciples, or more specifically to those who would become the leaders of the future Christian community.

Therefore every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven could indeed include anyone who is placed in a position of authority to instruct others in kingdom principles.

Subsequently, I sense that Jesus was informing His disciples that a new age was about to burst forth; a new battlefield was being drawn, and the kingdom of God would be taken with violence, mainly in the form of violence to the old self-will. Those who

have been instructed and have been chosen to instruct others must be willing to submit to all of the above-mentioned kingdom concepts and principles. They must be willing to sell out to the King. And then they must also be able to discern and teach both the Old and the New Testaments, while at the same time incorporating the life-changing principles inaugurated by the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus Christ.

In other words skilled in presenting orthodox right belief and worship, leaders and teachers must present to the people both Law and Grace in perfect harmony with the Holy Spirit.

For this reason and according to Acts 2:42 the early church continued to devote themselves to the law and the prophets, the memoirs of the apostles and to the communal *koineia* life, to the breaking of the one loaf and to the prayers.

And so may we be found faithful in following their examples as we continue to carry out His mission one day at a time?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.