

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 30 July 2023 + I Kgs 3 + Rom 8 + Mt 13:44-52

This weekend, we are concluding a series of 3 Sundays looking at the “parables of the Kingdom of Heaven” in St. Matthew’s Gospel. Now recall that the parables of Jesus are kind of like onions; you have to peel them in order to uncover layers of meaning. This also means that there is more than one way to interpret the parables. And so the way that we usually interpret our parables today is to say that Jesus and His Kingdom is that “*treasure in the field*”, and that “*pearl of great price*”, which is worth *our* selling everything in order to attain. And this is very true. We only have to look at the lives of the Saints and see that many of them, such as St. Francis of Assisi and St. Katherine Drexel, were enormously wealthy, and yet they joyfully gave away *everything* they owned in order to inherit the Kingdom. We are certainly called to follow their example according to God’s will.

But I’d like to propose an interpretation of today’s Gospel from a different perspective. That is, if we look closely at the progression of Jesus’ parables we have heard the last 3 weeks, we see that Jesus is first of all revealing Himself. That is, *He is the Kingdom*. He is the Sower who scatters the seeds of His Word on many different kinds of soil. He is also the man who sows good seeds in a wheat field; a field in which satan comes and sows weeds amongst the wheat. And so what might we learn if we looked at today’s parables and asked: what if that *God* is the one who buys the field; if *God* is the merchant who finds the pearl of great price; if God is the net thrown into the sea, *collecting fish of every kind*?

Well first, we’d see that to God, all of humanity is a great treasure. After all, He is our Father, Who loves His children more than we can begin to comprehend. And so He has extravagantly sowed the seeds of His Word in the great field of humanity. Even though there is now both wheat and weeds in this field, so much so that it often seems that evil has taken over the field, God knows that there is still a great treasure in that field, and that the time for His harvest will come. And so our parable today would read that *out of joy [God] goes and sells all that He has and buys that field*. Now we might ask, how can God *sell all He has*? Well, in order to ‘redeem’, that is, to *buy back* the great treasure of humanity from the adversary, God had to pay an unthinkable price: the price of His only-begotten Son. In other words, God gave up *everything* in order to bring us back to Him.

The parable of the merchant’s pearl of great price tells a similar story. God is the *merchant searching for fine pearls*. To the Father, we, His children, are that *pearl of great price*, and the Father did not spare His own Son to purchase this pearl. But I think it is very interesting to note that we hear nothing of this merchant reselling the costly pearl for a profit. We would have expected that; after all, that’s what merchants do: buy low and sell high. But this merchant wants the pearl completely for Himself. That’s why he buys it at the cost of everything He has. I think this reading of these 2 parables is best summed up by a line from St. John’s Gospel (13:1) that offers us a lifetime’s worth of consideration that

says, just before His death, *Jesus...having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.* To the end. There is no greater love than the love with which our God loves us.

Before we look at the final parable, let's pause a moment and take stock of what Jesus has revealed about Himself so far. There was no price too high for God the Father to pay in order to redeem His lost children. And that price really was unthinkable: it was the price of Jesus' death on the Cross; a death He willingly accepted for our salvation. Even more incredible is that fact that Christ died for all humanity; both *wheat and weeds!* Talk about good news! But as we heard in our 2nd reading today, God also foreknew who would accept Him, and who, unfortunately, would deny Him. This sad reality frames our final parable.

In our reading, if Jesus is the net *thrown into the sea, which collects fish of every kind*, then He has come to gather *all* the 'fish' that make up scattered humanity. But contrary to what our relativistic society may say, there is good and evil, and hell exists. Jesus now tells us that what we believe and what we do on earth has eternal consequences. And so He warns us, *at the end of the age...the angels will go out and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.*

Now I know it is neither pleasant nor popular to speak of hell these days, but if Jesus does, then so must we. Indeed, Pope Francis once bluntly said to members of the Italian mafia: *"hell...awaits you if you continue on this road."* The Catechism affirms *the existence of hell and its eternity.* It states: *Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, "eternal fire." The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God (1035).*

And so Jesus' parables offer us a first of all a vision of hope: God has come to rescue all of fallen humanity, and to gather it up to be with Him forever. But the parables also include the very real warning of the consequences of rejecting our Redeemer. This is why Jesus asks his disciples, *Do you understand all these things?* In other words, life is serious business. It is so easy now in our comfortable society to simply glide through our lives, ignoring the eternal life to come. But each of us must someday stand before Almighty God and give an account for our lives here on earth. It could even be today. Are you ready?

This then, is the final message of the parables: *be ready.* Having heard the words of Jesus, all of us are now like the *scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven.* We have been purchased at such a great price, and made stewards of the Kingdom of heaven which begins here on earth. This is serious business. And so like King Solomon in our 1st reading today, we need to pray—to ask God for *an understanding heart...to distinguish right from wrong.* If we ask for this gift in simplicity of heart, God will not fail to pour it out upon us in abundance, and we will not need to fear, but rather joyful await our own judgment day.