

Sermon at St Peter & St Paul Great Bowden on 5th Sunday after Trinity (24.7.11)
Finding the pearl of great price

*Lord, what we know not, teach us; what we have not, give us;
and what we are not, make us. Amen*

It was one of those 'ureka' moments. I was sitting in a physics lesson – feeling overwhelmed & under-inspired. I was at Public School, the child of successful parents; in a competitive environment of cold showers, early morning runs, chapel, prep & sport. And yet something was missing. I wasn't outwardly unhappy & yet I didn't feel at home: I didn't feel drawn to compete in the race that everyone else seemed to be running!

And then something happened... suddenly, mysteriously, joyfully & in a way that seemed completely natural, I was aware of becoming filled with a 'Presence'. I almost had to pinch myself to check it was really happening & wasn't just a dream. But sure enough I knew, without any doubt, that God's Spirit was with me, that he was in every cell of my body; that there was (despite all the inconveniences, as I felt them to be, of boarding school) overpowering light – and that all I needed to do was to follow this light, the light of Christ, and to inhabit its freedom & joy & peace. It was an experience that I will never forget. One that slowly begun to change me- from a mildly disaffected 14 year old (!), to a man with a mission & a life to be lived – from which vantage-point, whatever the highs & lows that followed, I would never look back.

Our Gospel today – what I would subtitle 'Finding the pearl of great price' – is all about discovering the Presence of Christ: the secret of His Kingdom: the mystery of His Gospel. And it contains not just a single pearl of great price, but a string of them: so many of them that one could spend the rest of one's life meditating & reflecting on their significance & seeking out their meaning in everyday life.

We've had, over the past 3 weeks, a great feast of parables: Jesus' teaching at its most powerful & subtle & profound.

- The parable of the sower – of the seed which land in different kinds of soil, with our encouragement to really listen & allow God to develop (in us) good soil.
- The parable of the weeds & the wheat, with the insight that much of God's life (in us) is hidden: it is known only by our fruits, but we do have someone to help us, the gift of the Holy Spirit

And today's Gospel concludes Jesus' teaching in parables in Matthew 13, with a whole string of pearls, lively metaphors for what the Kingdom of God: His presence in us, looks like. And they're all pictures that have percolated into our collective culture – but do we stop to look at what they're really saying?

- First there's the mustard seed: the smallest of all the seeds that, when sown, becomes the greatest of all the shrubs
- Then there's the yeast which the woman took & mixed in with flour, until (mysteriously) all of it becomes leavened
- Then there's the treasure hidden in the field – I love this one – which the man finds, and in his joy goes & sells all that he has, & buys the field!
- And there's the merchant in search of fine pearls who, like the owner of the field, goes & sells all that he has to possess it
- And Jesus' finishes with a different parable, rather like the weeds & the wheat, of a fisherman throwing out his net, and catching fish of every kind: the good & the bad. A picture, no doubt, of the final judgement

But I wonder what the first four of these parables, the so-called Kingdom parables, all have in common? Is there anything in them that speaks to us today, in our search – in a restless & divided world – for what really matters/ what is of lasting importance?

At home I've got a book – you may have it too – of 'stories that Jesus told', and it includes (among others) the parable of the precious pearl: the pearl of great price, which the merchant sought. And as with all good children's books, it illustrates the point of the parable in a wonderful way.

- Here is the man, who is well dressed, with a beautiful feather in his cap & lots of worldly wealth; he has a large house, with at least 5 storeys & a fountain in his garden; he has fine furniture, good food & is able (having accumulated his wealth) to live a life of leisure; but he doesn't look very happy
- Then, one day, he suddenly sees the pearl, on sale & his eyes light up... he goes away to think about it, realising that the pearl is worth everything he has; but he wants it more than anything else in the world.
- But, without delay, he makes a decision; he goes & begins to sell everything (he puts his house up for sale & gets rid of all his possessions, until all he has left is his simple tunic) – although he does keep his favourite feather cap!
- And then he buys the pearl of great price: and we see him (in the last scene) dancing for joy, the world full of light.....

The Kingdom, says Jesus, is like that pearl: it is most precious & valuable than anything else. In fact it's so valuable that, if necessary, it's worth giving up everything else to possess it. Although, unlike worldly treasure, the great paradox is that it doesn't cost us anything (in material terms) because it's pure gift: something that God, in his generous mercy, longs to pour into our laps.

One of the great gifts of the parables of Jesus is that they reveal to us something about God – his loving Presence, in Christ & through the Holy Spirit – which is of the nature of paradox: in other words it is, at the same time, both ubiquitous (present everywhere, in his creation) & yet it's also hidden. We only possess it through the gift of faith, the opening of our eyes, our ears & our hearts (often beneath the surface of our experience) to experience him.

It's a bit like being set within a beautiful garden or an exquisite picture gallery (or whatever the equivalent of abundance would be for you), and yet being so busy or preoccupied that we're incapable of realising what's actually there... As I discovered, all those years ago at school, it was only when I was led to turn aside from all the minor irritations of day-to-day life, that my eyes were opened to the abundance of God that was already there – only I hadn't noticed.

So what is the precious pearl? That pearl of great price, worth more than all of our worldly wealth, our achievements, our efforts or our desires? (Silence) That precious pearl that God longs to give us, & to revive in us, so that we might know life & joy & peace & hope & meaning in all their fullness, in Christ.

It is, I believe, pure gift – the gift of faith which is always there for us, if we only stop to ask God for it. It is, more than words or any doctrine (however true) the still presence of Christ in us, who is love alone. It is the still point of our being, where (beyond our anxieties or fears, our hopes & dreams) we made whole &, in trusting prayer, belong wholly to Christ. It is being strengthened from within, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to face all that diminishes life, all the despoils life, all that is evil, with the infinitely more powerful healing presence of God himself. It is an awareness, beyond the struggles of the mind & ego & the blows of tragic suffering, or the enfolding love of God. It is the passion & freedom of living the Gospel, the topsy-turvy way of God's Kingdom, which doesn't make any sense from a worldly point of view – loving our enemies & giving to those who deserve nothing – but, paradoxically, brings life in all its fullness: something that material things (without the Spirit of Christ) never can.

The problem is, of course, God's presence, his kingdom, his Gospel, can be elusive. One moment we have it, and the next moment it seems to have eluded us. And when that happens, when God is apparently absent, then any number of things can come to fill the void. But this is where we need to be fed: we need to open our eyes to be aware of God, we need to search for him, we need to be still to listen to his voice, we need to read his Word. We need, once we have tasted that the Lord is good, never to leave him, but to trust in him... and to allow him to live in us. For as St Paul says, in that wonderful chapter from Romans, which also concludes today, and has so much to say about finding God, 'If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son... will he not with him also give us everything else?'... No, in all these things we are more than conquers through him who loves us.' For God is always present to us and in us, whether we realise it or not, the challenge is to recognise his presence – and stoop low enough to hear his voice.

I want to end with a poem by one of my favourite poets, R S Thomas, which is really a meditation on today's Gospel, the Bright Field:

"I have seen the sun breakthrough
To illuminate a small field
For a while, and gone my way
And forgotten it. But that was the pearl
Of great price, the one field that had
The treasure in it. I realise now
That I must give all that I have
To possess it. Life is not hurrying

On to a receding future, nor hankering after
An imagined past. It is the turning
Aside like Moses to the miracle
Of the lit bush, to a brightness
That seemed as transitory as your youth
Once, but is the eternity that awaits you." *Amen*