

Pentecost 8 2020

Matthew 13:44-53

Contemplatio: Michael Wood

The Gospel readings over the last couple of weeks have focussed on a series of Jesus' parables about the Kingdom of Heaven, and this continues today with three more.

As we are probably all aware, when Jesus talks about the Kingdom of Heaven he's talking about a place. He's talking about what things look like here on earth when God is getting God's way – which, clearly, is not all the time. But when the influence of the Christlike God is spreading (like a virulent mustard weed; or like stinky yeast in dough) we will start to notice certain things. A certain culture starts to be seen. The Kingdom of Heaven is what this world looks like when God is getting God's way.

Today we hear three more short parables of the Kingdom – in rapid succession:

- The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field
- The Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls
- The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind

In the first two of the parables, the Kingdom is something which a person is searching for. It is slightly hidden, waiting for the active seeker to find it. The Kingdom makes us do some work. It doesn't give itself up to any random passer-by, but only to the one who seeking it. It is like treasure buried in the sand at the beach waiting for that guy with the metal detector, patiently and assiduously, working his way along the beach at all hours of the day, in all weather, perhaps he is the only one on the beach – but he has great faith that if he keeps searching long enough, the treasure will be revealed.

In the last of the parables, the Kingdom is something far more active – it's like a net thrown into the sea. We are caught up into this net whether we like it or not and regardless of our virtue or lack of virtue, or our interest.

In the first two parables, we are the seeker. In the third parable, we are the sought.

These contrasting dimensions say something summaries something about the spiritual journey and Gods' relationship with us. Sometimes God allows God's self to be found after some hard work. Sometimes God seems to come after us.

My first experience of God was of God coming after me. I was an avoider rather than a seeker. I was swimming away furiously but got caught in God's net. It's interesting that the parable talks about a net being thrown into the sea because I was, at the time of God pursuing me, a sailor in the merchant navy. The poet Francis Thomson wrote a poem called 'The Hound of Heaven' where he experiences God as like a pursuing dog:

I FLED Him, down the nights and down the days;
 I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
 I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
 Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
 I hid from Him, and under running laughter. 5
 Up vistaed hopes I sped;
 And shot, precipitated,
 Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,
 From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
 But with unhurrying chase, 10
 And unperturbèd pace,
 Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
 They beat—and a Voice beat
 More instant than the Feet—
 ‘All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.

Well that is exactly like it was like for me. God eventually caught up with me and my conversion experience was not unlike that of CS Lewis. This is what CS Lewis wrote about his own conversation, in his book, ‘surprised by joy’:

“You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England”.

Even after being caught there can be a weeping and gnashing of teeth as we are thrown into the fire of purification where all the posturings of our egos are gradually burned away. I doubt that many people are found to be in the category of the righteous. Even Jesus says to one of his interlocutors, ‘why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone’ (Mark 10:18).

So much for being pursued.

Let us return to the other two parables, where the Kingdom is described as treasure and a pearl of such great value that we are willing to give up everything to have it. There is a story from the early church recorded in the Acts of the Apostles not long after the Pentecost experience:

“Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds[a] to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home[b] and ate their food with glad and generous[c] hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.(Acts 2:43-47)

What is it about the Kingdom that is so valuable that people are willing to give away everything to acquire it?

Here’s another story from Sarah Miles, who lives in San Francisco. She wrote a beautiful book called “Take this Bread”.

“One early, cloudy morning when I was forty-six, I walked into a church [St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church], ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine. A routine Sunday activity for tens of millions of Americans — except that up until that moment I’d led a thoroughly secular life, at best indifferent to religion, more often appalled by its fundamentalist crusades. This was my first communion. It changed everything.

Eating Jesus, as I did that day to my great astonishment, led me against all my expectations to a faith I’d scorned and work I’d never imagined. The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all, but actual food — indeed, the bread of life. In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realized what I’d been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people.

And so I did. I took communion, I passed the bread to others, and then I kept going, compelled to find new ways to share what I’d experienced. I started a food pantry and gave away literally tons of fruit and vegetables and cereal around the same altar where I’d first received the body of Christ. I organized new pantries all over my city to provide hundreds and hundreds of hungry families with free groceries each week. Without committees or meetings or even an official telephone number, I recruited scores of volunteers and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars

My new vocation didn’t turn out to be as simple as going to church on Sundays, folding my hands in the pews and declaring myself ‘saved.’ Nor did my volunteer church work mean talking kindly to poor folks and handing them the occasional sandwich from a sanctified distance. I had to trudge in the rain through housing projects, sit on the curb wiping the runny nose of a psychotic man, take the firing pin out of a battered woman’s .357 Magnum, then stick the gun in a cookie tin in the trunk of my car. I had to struggle with my atheist family, my doubting friends, and the prejudices and traditions of my new-found church. I learned about the great American scandal of the politics of food, the economy of hunger, and the rules of money. I met thieves, child abusers, millionaires, day laborers, politicians, schizophrenics, gangsters and bishops, all blown into my life through the restless power of a call to feed people, widening what I thought of as my ‘community’ in ways that were exhilarating, confusing, often scary.

Mine is a personal story of an unexpected and terribly inconvenient Christian conversion, told by a very unlikely convert: a blue-state, secular intellectual; a lesbian, a left-wing journalist with a habit of skepticism. I’m not the person my reporter colleagues ever expected to see exchanging blessings with street-corner evangelists”.

The pearl of great price – the treasure hidden in the field – is that we don’t need to scapegoat or exclude anyone in order to create our human society. We are bound only by a God who looks, sounds and acts like Jesus. Here everyone is welcome.

This vision of the Kingdom is so absolutely compelling and of such extraordinary beauty that we will do anything to attain it.