

Parable of the hidden treasure and the Pearl of great price - Matthew 13:44-46

We are going to continue to look at the parables in Matthew 13. We looked at the mustard seed last time and I am still learning more from that parable. You could go through the whole Bible and the whole of Church history and see that that parable is prophetic, that is how God moves and how the Kingdom has, is and is still growing.

There are a lot of debates about the Kingdom, basically surrounding when the Kingdom is, what it involves, is it here now, has it come in Jesus or will it be when Jesus gets back. Jesus didn't really enter into this apart from to tell us that 'The Kingdom is within/among you' in Luke. Therefore if Jesus didn't really get into it then neither will I, apart from to say we are citizens of the Kingdom and so understanding Jesus' teachings on the Kingdom and what they mean to us is very important. Jesus tells us that he came to 'declare the Kingdom' so let's pay attention to what he taught.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones sums it up for me when he wrote

'It is a Kingdom which is to come, yes. But it is also a Kingdom which has come. The Kingdom of God is among you and within you; The Kingdom of God is in every true Christian. He reigns in the Church when she acknowledges Him truly. The Kingdom has come, The Kingdom is coming, The Kingdom is yet to come. Now we must always bear that in mind. Whenever Christ is enthroned as King, the Kingdom of God is come, so that, while we cannot say that He is ruling over all in the world at the present time, He is certainly ruling in that way in the hearts and lives of all his people.'

I want to explore the parables of Jesus, look at what he said, what he might of meant, what it means to us and what it meant at the time.

We looked at the mustard seed last time, verses 31 - 32. We saw how The Kingdom moves and grows and what it may look like today. We saw the fact that this parable is prophetic and tells us a lot about the Church and what we as a church can expect. Today we are looking at verses 44 - 46.

This is a passage that again like the mustard seed I thought only had one point to it and paid little attention to it. I thought it speaks of how valuable the Kingdom is, that's it. If that is all you take from this so be it, the Kingdom is valuable beyond measure, but there is a lot more to this passage than initially meets the eye. A bit of digging, excuse the pun, and we find a lot more. This parable is also a tremendous blessing and is very prophetic. Jesus knew what he was telling us and we need to pay attention.

We will take this parable in it's 2 parts and explore what each one tells us, the hidden treasure and the pearls, then we will look at how these 2 join together, and believe me, this is good!

1) The hidden treasure

The Kingdom in this verse is the treasure, it is valuable, obviously from the verse it is worth an awful lot. We are the finders. Now to Jesus' audience someone finding treasure would be of no surprise and would not conjure up any images of pirates! This was before there were any banks or building societies and what people used to do with their valuables to keep them safe was to bury them somewhere in their land to dig up later. Now our man in this verse may have been working or just stumbled onto this land, we are not told, but he went away when he found this treasure sold everything he owned and bought the field to own this treasure.

What is interesting is that Jewish law basically said finders keepers, he could have claimed that treasure for his own, but he wanted to be sure to own it, and maybe as we look into it we'll understand a bit more of why he gave everything up..

Lets pause here before we go any further as it is important to note this. This was just another day, a day at work or a day walking. This is no special time or place, he has not had to dress in his best gear to find this treasure, on a normal day he finds the most valuable treasure. This is an everyday man, an everyday place, yet he finds the kingdom. In everyday we can stumble across the kingdom. It is all around and accessible to all. We must not fall into the trap of thinking 'when such and such happens' or 'when life gets less busy' I will seek the Kingdom. We can hold back from diving into the Kingdom waiting for what we think will be just the right time/ the right set of circumstances. Our man here doesn't do that. He is straight in there, he goes for it with all he has, literally. Today is as good a day as any to dive straight in, don't delay, grab the Kingdom and live it. It is there for the taking.

This brings us onto how our guy reacts here. There is no delay. Once seen he can not ignore the treasure, and there is a real sense of urgency. He does not go and count the cost out and budget, he doesn't wait for his stocks to mature. He goes and sells all he has, everything, straight away, without a second thought, to buy this treasure. His possessions suddenly seem worthless as he gladly, in his joy, sells them just to get this treasure. Nothing compares to it.

Philippians 3:7-9a Paul writes

*'But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake Christ.
What is more I consider everything a loss compared to the
surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I
have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain
Christ and be found in him.'*

Our man recognises that.

It is so important it just can't wait. So urgent. When did I last feel like that? When did

we last have that sense of urgency? I have always struggled with the street preachers who shout at people, I've always wondered how they are received. But you know what, at least they have this sense of urgency, at least they are proclaiming the Kingdom, it is so valuable, all they can do is share it. There is a lot to be said for that.

We need to look at this treasure again and find this urgency! We need to act recklessly, we need to take a risk! God loves the passionate man, God loves the risk takers. This man sells everything. This is not just his house or his car, this is everything, he is losing his security, his lifestyle, his reputation. Today in a society of 'you are what you own' he loses his very identity. It all goes. Will we go that far, our security, our reputations, our identities. will we give it all up?

Are we willing to feel insecure etc to secure the Kingdom? What is there that you wouldn't give up? I think that this is an ongoing thing, are you constantly striving to give more to God, to really give your all to the pursuit of his Kingdom? So we think 'but of course I can't give it all up can I?'

Something Soren Kierkegaard said was

'Take any words in the new testament and forget everything except pledging yourself accordingly. My God, you will say, If I do that my whole life will be ruined. How will I ever get on in the World'

Exactly. We are to get on in the Kingdom, not the world, give it up. Let it go. Abandon yourself to the Kingdom. Let's be honest, if you have valued something higher than the Kingdom you need to repent.

The people who will move in the Kingdom, those God will use are the ones who are willing to risk it all because of this sense of urgency. I am still trying to understand that but I think that the Kingdom is not won by strength or our achievements, it is won by sacrifice.

We cannot escape one subject here, money. I could not talk on this parable and not mention it. However, I want to look at the Kingdom not money, there are others better than me to talk on this and some have. However, what must be said is that 'man cannot serve 2 masters, he cannot serve both God and money so I'll leave it at this, who does your cash belong to?'

This parable tells us we have to put it all aside to grasp the Kingdom. We can find it for free but to obtain it is going to cost us dearly. It is easy to be a Christian in England today, but it is a lot harder to follow Jesus. Let us not be misguided by some modern teaching on prosperity and fortune or an easy Christian life. Yes God wants to bless us but we need to readjust our understanding of what that means. God moves the most tangibly in the places where the Church has nothing, where it is persecuted. Where to serve God is to risk your life, giving everything for the Kingdom. There is our modern

day example, will we follow it?

So we've seen our man puts aside any delay, but he also puts aside his doubts. He doesn't wait to think is this treasure real, did I actually see that or was it a mirage? We unfortunately have all the time in the world (so we think) to ponder any doubt that creeps in. The persecuted Church cannot really afford this luxury and maybe this is one reason we see them grow, they are interested in action. Like our hero here. He acts now, no doubts. Doubt can be useful to grow our faith and we need to wrestle with topics, I believe that, we could spend all day debating whether we need doubt to truly have faith, but doubt should never be at the expense of claiming the Kingdom.

Dominic Miller sums it up for me when he writes

'My most recent faith struggle is not one of intellect. I don't really do that anymore. Sooner or later you just figure out that there are some guys who don't believe in God and they can prove that he doesn't exist, and some other guys do believe in God and they can prove he does exist, The argument stopped being about God a long time ago and now it is about who is smarter and honestly I don't care'.

I like that.

We have here the challenge to give all. But we also have the invitation to dive in full hog. Too often we feel the need to keep one foot in the world. This can be under the guise of being 'culturally relevant' or it can be simply due to doubt. But we need to abandon this and give in to this Kingdom we have found. I am becoming really passionate as I am looking at the Kingdom to see the Church getting it right, to be the church God wants it to be, to be the example in the World of God's Kingdom and Will here on earth as it is in heaven.

One part of this parable that is tricky to understand is what it means that the man hides the treasure. Obviously it makes sense for the story, he needed to find it again before anyone else came and got it. But surely this is not telling us to be selfish with the Kingdom.

I think that this tells us again about the urgency the man felt and we should feel. But is he being selfish or could he be considered to be being protective? I wonder if this is demonstrating how protective we should feel over the Kingdom. It is something that is personally ours, that is precious to us, we should keep it, defend it and guard it. That is not saying that the Kingdom is weak and needs our protection, it is saying that we need to love it and defend it from those outside keen to discredit the Kingdom or to slander the Church. We get an awful lot of bad press and attacks from every side in this world and it can become easy to resign to this and just allow the snide comments to get by and not challenge them. But I would not let someone just insult my wife or family and leave it at that, so why the Kingdom. It is precious, yes, but it is precious to us, we should act like it

and we should be protective of it.

I'm not saying to defend it like other faiths have been seen to with threats and violence, far from it. But Jesus did clear the temple, Saints have been martyred for defending the gospel, God tells us to defend the rights of the widow or the orphan in the Kingdom. Perhaps this is the protectiveness we need to discover, not the aggressive world view of 'protection' or defence, but the way Jesus stood up for what is right, the Kingdom's values, we are called to be peaceful yes, but not necessarily passive.

So this is our first parable, we see an ordinary day, and ordinary man making the most important decision and action, we see sacrifice, risk, faith and we also see a sense of God's justice. Remember the parable of the workers who all get paid the same wage regardless how long they worked? There is good news and bad news here. The Kingdom is within your reach, you can afford it. The bad news is that it will cost you everything. Just look at the disciples, it cost them all they had, and we looked a bit last time that we may be heading in the same direction. Don't be fooled, following Jesus is dangerous for your comfort. Jesus said 'If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'.

One last thing I want to mention by way of warning before we go on to the second parable. I feel that we must be able to separate the joy we feel and the Kingdom. A lot of churches today are very 'feelings' based and there is a lot of focus on the joy that they have found, not much on the Kingdom. We need to be careful that we are not trying to bottle this joy up and sell it as the Kingdom, to sell our joy as the answer to the World. What God can do for you. We risk mimicking the consumer society when we do this. The joy comes from finding the Kingdom. The joy is easy to sell, it is free, the Kingdom isn't, it involves sacrifice and cost. It is easier to live a life focusing on this joy, but we risk missing the Kingdom. Let us enjoy the Joy of finding the Kingdom but not fall into the trap of seeking this joy, let's seek the Kingdom of God. Joy will follow, it is a fruit of the spirit but seek the Kingdom first and it will be added to you.

Lets search ourselves and be honest, are we seeking a joyful life or the Kingdom of God? What I fear we may breed is a 'bi-polar faith', St. John of the cross referred to a 'spiritual sweet-tooth'. Where folk have a faith of incredible highs when they feel God and incredibly low lows when they don't. We miss discipleship and see what we can get out of God. There are worship services where, as Mark Labberton notices, we *'foster the self indulgent tendencies of our culture rather than nurturing the self sacrificing life of the Kingdom'*.

We are prone to distraction, There is no easy road, Jesus said 'narrow is the road' lets make sure we are seeking the Kingdom of God.

Well, this is the first part of the Parable, this is our side of the deal. What we have now is the second part

The Pearls

I always used to read this as another way of saying the first thing again but I am learning that Jesus often teaches us something else by his second way of putting something. My traditional view of this parable was that the Kingdom is a fine pearl, worth everything, very precious, period.

However, we need to read more closely if we dismiss this as saying the same thing. The Kingdom of God is not the Pearl in this passage, the verse is clear, God is the pearl merchant seeking out fine pearls. And if God is the merchant who are we? Good news, we are the pearls! You see we stumble upon the treasure as in the first verse but God actively seeks us out, Hallelujah! God the father seeks us out, dwell on that, if nothing else know that.

Pearls in Jesus' time were the diamonds of today, they were the most valuable gem. Rulers used to dissolve pearls in wine to show off how rich they were. They really were the most valuable thing in Rome, the most valuable analogy Jesus could have chosen. That is you to God. That is beautiful, be blessed by that.

So we can see we are the Pearls and God is the Pearl merchant. It is important to pause here and take note of how pearls were collected. They did not have the diving equipment that we have today, what a pearl diver did was to tie rocks around his body and jump into the sea holding his breath. He would search out pearls in the ocean then cut himself free and swim up. This was a dangerous business and a lot of people died fishing pearls. I can't think of much worse.

Let us think about this and hear how familiar this all is. Someone weighs themselves down to descend to the depths and rescue all those at the bottom. Bringing them to the surface, cleaning them up. Here we not only have an analogy of the Kingdom but we also have a beautiful analogy of our salvation. Jesus takes the weight of the worlds sin, dives down to the depths and searches out those he sees as beautiful to bring them up and present them before the father, our pearl collector. Pure and blameless.

This is beautiful, especially because we are pearls before we are saved. We need to be rescued and cleaned, but Jesus came down and recognised the pearls in their dirt. You are worth his sacrifice as he sees your potential. If you don't know this then know it, Jesus sees the potential in you, the beauty in you, you are worth everything to him.

Nelson Mandela said

*'Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It's our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves : Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous,
talented and fabulous?
Actually, who are you not to be- you are a child of God.
Your playing small does not serve the world.
There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that*

*other people won't feel insecure around you.
We are born to make manifest the Glory of God that is within us.
It is not just in some; it is in everyone, and as we let
our own light shine, we consciously give other people
permission to do the same. As we are liberated from
our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.'*

We often are told that Jesus loves us and he loves us as we are, but we rarely pause to see how he views us, we are not the embarrassing mistake that keeps getting it wrong, We are beautiful, we are pleasing to him, so much so that he seeks us out. You are beautiful. You are not only beautiful but you are pure and presentable to the father.

Here we have the whole glorious gospel beautifully explained in a parable.

God is the pearl collector and today we are his hands in seeking those pearls and leading people to accept and know that they are truly loved and beautiful. By loving them as the father loves them. In presenting the Gospel we should not condemn or judge others but we should see how truly valuable people are to God. And they should recognise that love and know that Christ died to set them free, to rescue them.

I remember hearing a preacher put the challenge like this... *Do you love me because you want to save me, or do you want to save me because you love me?'*

Just because people are pearls does not mean that they are saved, remember the parable with the wedding feast where the master invites those from the streets but comes down and throws out someone who is not dressed for the banquet. We still need to be collected, we still need to be cleaned and presented to the father. But others need to know that you don't have to sit in the depths, whether you recognise you're precious or not. You can be a pearl in the possession of the Father.

What we see here is us giving everything for a God who has already given his all for us. I can only recognise one aspect of my life that is similar, where each party gives everything they have to and for the other and that is marriage, a wedding. When I got married everything I had became my wife's and likewise everything she had became mine. It is important that we do not think of what we lose as neither one really loses out on anything, we gain everything. The same is true as the Church prepares itself to be the bride of Christ. We give our all to him who gave his all for us. This analogy is a recurring image throughout Scripture, from the Israelites unfaithfulness and comparisons to an unfaithful wife, to Revelation where we see Christ coming back for a spotless bride, us, the Church, ready for her groom.

This wedding is the most beautiful analogy of our redemption and our eternal freedom and relationship with Jesus Christ.

So this second parable here, rather than repeating the first one actually confirms God's love for us and gives us a glimpse of the deal from Heavens side. It is a parable of the

Kingdom but also of our salvation and our future as Christ's bride. There is actually a lot in here and I know that I have only scratched the surface, we've flown through a few concepts that I would invite you to go away and ponder.

So this is another great parable about the Kingdom which makes clear what is expected of us and what God has done, is doing and will do. But also it tells us that the Kingdom is valuable and so are you. But so are all those out there who do not yet know him. If we reflected our value to each other with the way we treat each other and reflect their value to them I believe they will come into the Kingdom, they won't be able to help themselves.

The invitation for us is clear, give it all up to him. Let go of anything that holds you back from the Kingdom because the rock that you think you are holding onto, your sense of security in the world, may be what is stopping you, as a pearl, being collected. Everything is God's anyway, give it back to him. Give it all and claim the Kingdom, let us seek this narrow road. We only have the one life and I don't think that this is it.

Chris Burnett