

Sermon 9th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 13:44-58

Open the eyes of my heart Lord, open the eyes of my heart. I want to see you, I want to see you. **Amen.**

Well, my prayer today is that you Lord will open the eyes of our hearts, about these parables of the Kingdom of heaven. Two weeks ago, we started delving into them and finding out about a God who generously offers everyone the opportunity to be part of the kingdom, as in the parable of the Sower. Last week in the parable of the weeds, we found out about a God of grace who lets both good and bad exist side by side, allowing for grace to flow when people accept the kingdom. In the parables of the yeast and the mustard seed, we had a sense of a God of growth and of encouragement, a God who invites us all into the Kingdom, this kingdom which is now but also not yet. And the parables this week are perhaps more descriptive of the kingdom than of God. Perhaps they depict what our spirituality is about. The pictures used, the pearl, the treasure, conjure up thoughts of something special, a vision of the future when we accept the grace of God and truly embrace the kingdom. But how do we get there, how are the eyes of our hearts opened, especially when the treasure is hidden? How do we grasp this treasure? Well not without choices. Let's have a look.

'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Here we have two parables spoken by Jesus side by side. I'm sure you can see the similarities. They are quite repetitive in their structure and meaning. And when we have repetition in scripture, it usually means that something important is being said. So what is Jesus saying about the kingdom of heaven here?

Well, each parable describes a situation of a person finding something they dearly want, something they are probably passionate about, and something that is not easy to find or see, something that is hidden. And in the joy of finding the treasure or the pearl, they decide to completely change their lives. In the first parable, someone unexpectedly finds some treasure, hides it in the field, and then goes and sells all that he has to buy the field and get the treasure. In the second, a merchant finds the perfect pearl that he has been looking for forever. He sells everything he has and buys the pearl. The act of finding these special things gives joy, it is transformative.

It's interesting to think that with both the treasure and the pearl, each gave someone a glimpse of the kingdom, a glimpse of joy, and having that glimpse, both people radically changed their circumstances to get that treasure. Is this what the kingdom does for us? Does just this glimpse of the kingdom, give us the freedom to "sell all", or the motivation to be part of it. Does it completely reorder our priorities?

What has been your pearl or your treasure? Have you ever found something or someone that inspired such joy, that you changed your life? These two parables describe the freedom and joy of people who have caught a glimpse of the kingdom. Perhaps they also describe the core of our spirituality: freedom from the attraction, absorption and concerns of the world. Not that these things are in themselves bad, but as believers, we who have caught the vision of God's love and God's future, and hope, that God's kingdom puts everything in its place and perspective. And this is hinted at in the next parable.

‘Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Well apart from the apocalyptic flavours at the end of this parable, does this one sound familiar? Can you see the similarity to the parable of the Weeds that we heard last week? This parable also describes the presence of both good and bad in the kingdom. But God’s grace is like a great net thrown over both, good and bad fish alike. This parable is a parable of great hope I think. For in God’s time, the good will prevail and the bad have the opportunity to receive God’s grace. Those who do not respond positively to God’s generosity will find themselves cast out, as fishermen throw out the bad fish. Like with the pearl of great price and the treasure in the field, action is required and the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father.

And almost as an afterthought, Jesus asks his disciples, because these parables are addressed to his disciples:

‘Have you understood all this?’ They answered, ‘Yes.’ And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.’ When Jesus had finished these parables, he left that place.

This last little parable combines some surprising elements doesn’t it, the wise master and the scribe?! Who were the scribes? They were part of the elite in Hebrew society. They were trained and could read and write, and in the gospels they regularly appear as part of the group of Jesus’ detractors

don't they? It seems as if in this last parable Jesus equates his disciples as scribes, but as scribes trained for the Kingdom of heaven. And these people are like the master who brings out both the old and the new treasure. Again we have this contrast between before and after, old and new. For the Gospel writer Matthew, who loved the scriptures so much, it was important to show that the Good News, the new news, comes out of the old scriptures, and that the disciples, who knew Jesus and understood the significance of the parables, were able to recast the Hebrew scriptural tradition with the images adapted to the surprising nature of the kingdom.

So how do we respond to these parables? At the beginning of this series, I started out with the model for church growth that included prayer, presence, proclamation and persuasion.

And the parables in this sermon series can be rather neatly fitted into the model. We've talked about prayer and presence, and I think that the action orientation of today's parables really match proclamation. Persuasion is I think something between each person and God. But for we believers, scribes of the kingdom so to speak, our role is in proclamation. It's a special role though isn't it, in this world where the treasure is hidden as the parable says. The kingdom is not so obvious to the people around us who don't believe. So proclamation can be an uphill slog. I actually think that telling people about the kingdom can often just lead to fruitless debates with both parties leaving dissatisfied. Even Jesus had a difficult time at the end of our reading when he is rejected by the people of his hometown.

I think proclamation is more about showing the transformative power of the kingdom through generous hospitality and love. There's a lot of people out there who aren't experiencing love or grace in their lives and our kingdom provides hope and joy, if only we can give people a taste of that.

That's why I encourage you to invite people to experience the love of God in our community friendly events and programs: the Op Shop, Food Relief, Games Nights, and hopefully soon, a playgroup and children's services. When a person experiences the love God, then perhaps they'll want to know more, and Alpha becomes a real option. So today, we have plenty of Alpha fliers. Perhaps take three to match your prayer card from last week, and when you have discerned who you will invite, you'll have something to give them. The Alpha banner will go up next week at the corner of our block, the Alpha page is back up on our website, and our Alpha comes up when you search Alpha website. I think Alpha is the best persuasion tool we have, so let's invite people onto Alpha and let God do the rest.

We've had a three week journey through the parables. I pray that the eyes of your hearts have been opened and that you have glimpsed the kingdom and feel encouraged to do something.

Let us pray.

God of Mission,
Who alone brings growth to your Church,
Send your Holy Spirit to give,
Vision to our planning,
Wisdom to our actions,
Joy to our worship,
And power to our witness.
Help our church to grow in numbers,
In spiritual commitment to you,
And in service to our local community,
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.