

17TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, A

KINGDOM OF HEAVEN: A TREASURE, A PEARL, A DRAGNET

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in the field ... like a merchant looking for fine pearl ... a dragnet cast into the sea” (Matt. 13: 44, 45, 47)

Like last Sunday, today, 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A, we are called to reflect on the parables of Jesus on the Kingdom of heaven. St. Matthew would not say “Kingdom of God” because as a Jew writing for Jewish audience, the name of God, Yahweh, was most infinitely Holiest of names that no man should ever utter. We should note that Chapter Thirteen of Matthew’s Gospel has seven interesting parables of Jesus on the Kingdom of Heaven. Last Sunday Jesus likened the Kingdom of Heaven to the man who planted wheat (the good seed) in his field but at night the enemy crept in to plant darnel (the bad seed); He also likened it to the mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds that grows to become the “biggest of all shrubs”; and to the yeast that the woman mixes with flour and it grows into a loaf of bread. In today’s Gospel (Matt. 13: 44-51), the Kingdom of Heaven is compared to a treasure hidden in the field; a pearl found; and a net cast into the sea and it catches both the good and the bad fish. Our focus today is on the abandonment of all other things for the sake of the kingdom, or the primal place that the Kingdom of Heaven should occupy in our lives, or still, the sacrifice we should make for the sake of the Kingdom, or the detachment from things earthly in order to be attached to the divine.

“The Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field ... like a merchant looking for fine pearls”: These two short parables are very similar. The man and the merchant in these parables found the treasure and the pearl by luck or by chance. They simply stumbled by them. Both went back, sold all they had and returned to buy the field and the pearl. The man, who found the treasure even “buries it again” – to make sure no one else finds it – before leaving happily. Why did they not take it away? Why this twist in these parables? Beyond securing it for himself, there are some basic attributes of the Kingdom of Heaven that we need to establish. Firstly, the Kingdom of Heaven is a treasure and a pearl of inestimable value and incomparable loveliness. It is “the best of the highest” of treasures and “the most beautiful of the loveliest” of pearls. Nothing else can come close to it in value and in worth. It deserves the abandonment of everything else a man has ever

and could ever possess. That explains why they had to sell everything they had before to buy the field and the pearl. It is a sign of detachment and a radical choice. The kind expected, if we must be part of the Kingdom. Secondly, it is rare: “not everyone can find it” (Matt. 7: 14). It is a hidden reality (Matt. 11: 25). This is why there is joy and excitement at finding it. Thirdly, the Kingdom of Heaven is not something we get by mere happenstance; we do not attain it by luck; it cannot be by chance. Fourthly, the way to the Kingdom is lined with honesty and hard work. That is why when they found it, they did not just take it and run away, but they left, sold all they had and bought the field of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great value. One can neither steal nor bribe his way into the Kingdom of Heaven. Making Heaven requires conscious strategic planning, sacrifices through self-denial, letting go and detachment. It demands making that inconvenient choice at all times and in all things.

What is the incomparable treasure in our lives?

What is that pearl of the greatest value in our family?

What are we prepared to lose everything for?

What are the ethos of our society?

What does our world consider the most important today?

What exactly is the Kingdom of Heaven? We pray in the Our Father: “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” The Kingdom of Heaven means the reign of God in our lives, our family, our Church, our world, where true love, peace, justice and equality reign supreme, guiding our thoughts, words and actions. It refers to a life lived in obedience to the Will of God; it is a life of surrender to and acceptance of the plans of God in one’s life. Man, on his own, cannot attain this level of existence. Solomon, in the First Reading (1Kgs. 3: 5, 7-12), understood the dynamics of this reign of God and desired it for the kingdom of Israel under his watch. And because he placed it on the highest rank on his priority scale he made the most of the opportunity God gave him to ask for: “a heart to understand how to discern between good and evil” (1 Kgs. 3: 9). We need to pray for divine wisdom to guide our understanding so that we can discern the Will of God in our daily lives and for the courage to choose it above all things. If God makes us such a generous offer, what would you ask for?

“Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea that brings a haul of all kinds”: It is in the nature of the dragnet to take in everything that comes to it – fish, sticks, leaves, sometimes snakes, and any other swimming or floating things within its catchment limits. Like the parable of the wheat and the darnel we listened to last Sunday, where the master asked that both plants be allowed to grow together until harvest time, so the dragnet catches everything and all are hauled up to the shore. This parable is first likened to the Church. Like the dragnet, it is the nature of the Church to be a home for all – saints and sinners, represented here by the good and the bad fish. The parable of the wheat and the darnel supports this idea. The expressed mission of Jesus, our Lord and Founder of our faith: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but the sinners” (Matt. 9: 13; Mk. 2: 17; Lk. 5: 32) attests to the inclusive nature of the Church. As a mother, the Church remains the only hope for her sinful sons and daughters to encounter the Lord, repent, have their sins forgiven and be saved.

Equally this parable of the dragnet addresses our attitudes towards others and challenges us to be open, receptive, non-judgemental, unprejudiced, unbiased, non-discriminatory and without stereotypes and hasty generalization in relating with others. Like the dragnet, we too should accept everyone and bear patiently with one another (Col. 3: 13; Eph. 4: 2).

The “separation of the good fish from the bad” refers to the time of judgement. It is axiomatic to say that the Day of the Lord will come, when each man/woman will be held to account for his life here on earth. So, while the doors of the Church remain open, while we are still in the dragnet, let us make the most of this opportunity so that we may not find ourselves weeping and grinding our teeth. Are we prepared?