

How valuable is Jesus to me?

The 20th Century Christian Writer best known of the Chronicles of Narnia - C.S. Lewis wrote:

If Christianity is false, it is of no importance at all, if it is true it is of ultimate importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important”.

It is this theme that is presented to us in today’s parables. Think about the first two parables, which have as a common theme - the radical response to the discovery of the treasure and the pearl. When thinking about the treasure, this was an accidental find. Was he a treasure hunter – or perhaps a hired hand, working in the field? Jesus doesn’t tell us. Here is the surprise about this parable, the twist. What would you do if you found a treasure in the field? I know what I would do, I would take it. But this man doesn’t do that. Instead he goes and buys the field and then declares the treasure is his. Here Jesus is teaching us that when it comes to his Kingdom, you can’t steal your way in, you can’t take advantage of it. Rather it is a Kingdom in which you need to invest, it is costly and this is what is asked of us, if we want to fully appropriate the treasure and the field. What is the treasure? It is the sacramental life and the teaching life of the Church, tied to its social action, moral teaching and beauty as expressed in literature, music and art. The field is the world, as Jesus told us in the parable from last week about the wheat and the weeds. The Christian is the person who wants to invest in others in the world so as to draw them to Jesus, to discover for themselves the wonder of the treasure.

One of the ways we will be doing this at St Peter’s is with the Alpha Course that will begin on September 21st. This 10 week course introduces people to Jesus in an environment that is inviting. A meal is shared, a talk is presented via video and then there is small group discussions. If you would like to take the Alpha Course and or invite someone to come along with you, please do. More information will be coming in August.

When it comes to the pearl of great price, Jesus is showing us that compared to the Kingdom of heaven, nothing is more valuable than it, like the man who knows this pearl is unlike any he has ever found before and he is willing to sell everything in order to acquire this pearl. It is this same theme that is expressed in today’s psalm where we read:

Truly I love your commandments more than gold, more than much fine gold... Your decrees are wonderful, therefore my soul keeps them.

And why does he take such delight in God’s treasure trove of commandments? We get the answer in the last verse of the psalm:

The unfolding of your word gives light, it imparts understanding to the simple.

It is this wisdom King Solomon prays for in our first reading when he requested:

Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern good from evil.

Jesus is teaching us in these two parables something about the Kingdom. When people discover it, either accidentally, like the man coming across the treasure in the field, or intentionally, like the man who was in search for fine pearls, it impacts our lives and results in a reevaluating of what is most important to me like King Solomon and the Psalmist.

This brings us then to the third of the parables. At the end of history (either our personal history, or history in general, whichever comes first), if we are found living a vital and personal relationship with Christ we will enter into his glory, the indescribable joy of everlasting life. But if we are not living in Christ's friendship when the end comes, then we will suffer eternal frustration - we who were created to enjoy the warm light of God's presence will be stuck forever in the cold shadows of his absence. It sounds harsh, but Jesus Christ mentions no third alternative. This helps explain why the farmer and the merchant sold everything they owned to get the treasure - it was worth it.

St. Augustine said that there are only two kinds of people, only two kingdoms of people, what he called the "city of God" and the "city of the world." He defined a city, or a community, not by sight or buildings or boundaries but by love. A "city" is a people unified by a common love. Love is the heart of the matter because it comes from the heart. "The city of God" is all who love God as their final end, their greatest good, and "the city of the world" is all who love themselves and this world as their final end. That's our most fundamental choice: Who is your God?¹

The Collect with which we began today's Mass fits so well with the parables.

O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom nothing has firm foundation. nothing is holy.

Let's pause here for a second. Do you hear how this prayer affirms the ultimate value of God and his kingdom? There is no firm foundation on which to build our lives outside of Christ because he is the one to whom we are ultimately journeying. Without Him we cannot become holy, which is to be set apart to become like him, as St Paul says in the reading from Romans. For we are predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus. That is holiness.

St John Paul II put it this way:

You are not the sum of your weaknesses and failures. You are the sum of the Father's love for you and your potential to image his Son Jesus.

¹ Kreeft, Peter. Food for the Soul: Reflections on the Mass Readings (Cycle A) (p. 670). Kindle Edition.

Do you hear what this means? When we understand the ultimate importance of the Kingdom we become by the grace of Jesus, images-living icons of holiness.

The Collect goes on to pray:

Bestow in abundance your mercy upon us, and grant that , with you are our ruler and guide, we may use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to those that ever endure.

This is what we want to remember. The good things that pass are indeed good but we want to hold fast to those things that ever endure.

This is called the principle of “First and Second Things.” If we put first things first, we get second things too, but if we put first things second and second things first, not only do we lose the first things, but we lose even the second things. If you put something above God and worship it as an idol—anything, whether it’s something general like power or pleasure or prestige or cleverness or health or mere survival, or something specific like money or sex or drugs or alcohol—if you put that second thing first you will not only lose God, the first thing, but you will also lose the joy in the second thing that you put in God’s place. All idols fail. We always spoil the joy we could have gotten from the second thing if we idolize it, even good things like marriage. If you worship your spouse as your God, you will mess up your marriage. Everything except God works by the law of diminishing returns: whatever you idolize will keep giving you less and less joy, so you keep trying more and more desperately to try to get the joy that it keeps giving you less and less of. That’s the psychology of idolatry. Psychologists call it addiction. And we are all addicts. We are not all alcoholics, but we are all sinaholics.²

And this is why we need today’s parables and the reminder that Christianity is not of moderate importance, it is of ultimate importance. May we all hold fast even now to those things that ever endure.

² *Kreeft, Peter. Food for the Soul: Reflections on the Mass Readings (Cycle A) (p. 658). Kindle Edition.*