

“Treasure”
(Matthew 13.44-52)

Grant Bullen

Introduction – The Kingdom of God and Parables

Jesus is *always* talking about *the kingdom of God* – it’s at the heart and centre of his proclamation. But what’s he talking about?

It’s not what we used to understand as *heaven* – that place above the clouds (somewhere) where good people go after they die. In fact, he’s not talking about the *next life* at all. Jesus says the Kingdom is present *here and now* – it’s *this life*. Indeed, the door is open, and we can walk in, any time we choose.

So, it’s not a place... but rather it’s a way of seeing... living... being.

It’s more like a state of consciousness – being awake to the reality of GOD.

We’re in the Kingdom when we see life as GOD does... which (of course) is how it really is.

Now, the culture we live in, sees life very differently... and so GOD’s culture is a puzzle to us.

Hence Jesus uses parables, to try to shake us out of the old into the new.

Parables are designed to disturb/unsettle our established assumptions.

For accessing the *culture of God*, requires us to free-up in a big way... and let go of previously held certainties.

In his parables Jesus says, *‘I know everyone think it’s like this. But what if in reality, it’s actually like this...’*

The Pearl

So, imagine a village square with a crowd gathered around Jesus and he says, *‘There’s this merchant – highly successful in the buying and selling of fine pearls. He’s prosperous... has a reputation for quality and range of stock... in fact people travel long*

*distances just to admire his personal collection of fabulous pearls. One day, in the market, scouring the stalls as usual, he comes across a single pearl of exquisite beauty. It isn't so much its size... nor at first glance its colour. Indeed, several other merchants had overlooked it that very day... but when he holds it in his hand... the warmth, the weight, the texture... and when he holds it up to the light... the colours, the shimmering beauty. He knows he has to have it. But the trader is reluctant to sell it.... can't be persuaded. So, the merchant goes home... sells everything he has... all his pearls ... even his personal collection... his shop, his home, his donkey, his wife and children... everything... and goes back and drowns the trader in cash... and secures **the** pearl. And this merchant goes away happy... for he's found what he was always looking for.'*

As Jesus finishes, there's titters of laughter... breaking into louder guffaws. 'What?' says Jesus... 'What?' And the crowd replies, 'That's a ridiculous story! How stupid is that merchant. Now he's got nothing – no collection, no business, no money, no home, no family – sure it may be a special pearl... but look what he's paid for it. Everything! That's ridiculous! No-one would be so stupid as to do that! And Jesus scratches his head and says, 'Oh, I guess you're right... But what I'm saying is... the Kingdom of God is like that pearl. And that merchant goes away happy.'

The Challenge

What's Jesus trying to open us to?

Well like all parables this story has a mysterious life of its own. I don't pretend this sermon contains it or exhausts it. At best it might open it for further exploration...

But I think it at least says this... That the kingdom is worth everything. It's not available at cut-price rates. We can't have our old life, the life we've constructed for ourselves with all our securities and medications, and then purchase the *happiness* of God as an add-on extra. To enter the new life of the *kingdom* requires the relinquishment of the old... We let go of all of it. It's a relinquishment so radical, so complete that Jesus says it's like a death...

You see it's not really a transaction. It's not about *buying* something or *earning* something. It's more like falling in love... head over heels. Becoming infatuated with a different vision... the vision of God and the kingdom... so much so that it becomes *everything*. There's something passionate... rash... wild... drastic... in this. For the kingdom doesn't reveal itself to those who play it safe... to those who hold onto old securities. The kingdom of Jesus is a wild place... where God roams free and untamed, like a tiger.

It's not that we possess the kingdom, but rather that *the kingdom* possesses us. It takes us over and becomes our *everything*... our vision... our hope... our dream... our life.

The Hidden Treasure

The gospel writer, Matthew, twins this parable, "*The Pearl of Great Price*" with one that is similar... but different... "*The Treasure in the Field*".

It goes like this...

'The culture of God is like a fabulous reef of gold... just sitting there hidden in a rocky outcrop in a country paddock. It's been there forever... but no-one's ever stopped long enough to see it. Then one night, a local, weaving his way home from the pub, taking a short-cut across his neighbour's paddock – trespassing actually – literally stumbles over it... He literally falls over it, and sees the gold glittering in the moonlight. The man gathers branches and bushes and hides his find. Now the neighbour's paddock is not for sale. But over the next days, this man sells up everything he has – his house, his furniture, his car, his dog... he cashes in every investment, calls in favours from family and friends. And later that week, he's at his neighbour's front door with the lot – bundles and bundles of cash – offering a ridiculous unrefusable price to buy that paddock. He goes away a happy man... a man who knows where the treasure is.'

This parable does indeed resemble the *Pearl of Great Price*... At its heart is the same wisdom – the kingdom is worth everything! And if you want to enter, you need to be

willing to let go of the securities of your old life. When this man finds the treasure, like the merchant, he responds decisively – he knows its worth! So, this parable shares a core insight... but it also carries something that is intriguingly different...

For unlike the pearl merchant, this man is *not* looking for the treasure... (the world of God). He's just going about his life, when he stumbles over it... unexpectedly... just there in a field he's walked past hundreds of times. My imagination is pricked by the fact it's in a field where legally he shouldn't even be. And if he hadn't drunk too much at the pub that night, he never would have. And there's something distinctly shifty about this character – hiding what he's found. And yet... *He goes away a happy man... a man who knows where the treasure is.*

I could go on and on... but that wouldn't be true to the spirit of the parables. So, it's good that my allotted 1,000 words are already over-spent. Because for the Word to come alive in you today, you need to be the one who takes these stories home, puzzling...

'What on earth is Jesus saying to me in this?'

But as a final sentence, *I'll go home this afternoon, knowing that, as always, I am hungry for the Kingdom, the world of God, the consciousness of God... frightened by what it might require of me... scanning my life as it is, my ordinary everyday life, wondering if I've missed something. What if the treasure is already here and now? Will I see it? Will I do anything about it?*

Postscript

I'm aware that there are 3 parables in this selection... and sermon-time only allowed me to do two. So, here's a postscript for the handful of you reading these sermons 'after the event'...

The third parable (vs. 47-50) is called "*The Dragnet*"... and is more difficult to hear, especially as the early church has (probably) added an allegorical interpretation to the text. The form of parable of which Jesus was a master were subversive stories, **not**

allegories... but for many years (and for many reasons) the Church chose to read them allegorically.

So, if we are to hear “*The Dragnet*” purely as story, in the style of the two that precede it, what might it have been like? *Perhaps something like this ????* (I’m not confident with this one!)

“What’s it like to live in the culture of God? Well, it’s like a man who decided to go fishing... for the first time. He’d watched others and thought, ‘This is a pretty easy way to get a feed and make a few dollars in the process.’ So, he bought a net, enlisted a mate or two to help, and had a go.

*And sure enough, it **was** easy. In came the net and it was full! Fish everywhere! But **then** came the hard bit! The fish were of all types – some of them he knew to be good; some he suspected were inedible (but he wasn’t at all sure); some of them he had absolutely no idea about. It was hard labour then... sitting there on the shore... going through the catch one by one... putting the good ones in his basket, throwing the rest away. Hard work. And he was by no means sure he was getting it right.”*

If it is something like this, it becomes a parable about *discernment*.

The *kingdom* is a place where we open ourselves (radically wide open) to the experience of life... opening ourselves to all that comes our way.

When we do that, we are often surprised at the abundance that flows in.

But then comes the hard bit... practising discernment about what to embrace and what to let go.

But as I say... I’m not sure about this one...