

SERMON FOR THE DIOCESE OF BUNBURY: GEOFF CHADWICK: 30/7/2023

OS17a SUNDAY BETWEEN 24 AND 30 JULY

Matthew 13.44–58: DISCOVERY PARABLES

There are so many wonderful sayings in today's Gospel reading. Where should we start?

Perhaps we should begin with the idea of discovery.

The discovery parables, as I will call them, may look similar on the surface but if you explore more deeply you will begin to notice some subtle differences.

For example:

- In the parable of the treasure hidden in the field, you will notice that the person who found the treasure wasn't looking for it. He stumbles upon it.
- In the case of fine pearls, the merchant is looking for them.
- And in the case of the fishing net, fish are, caught and then sorted according to their quality.

It's quite likely that these parables were spoken by Jesus on different occasions and that the Gospel writer gathered them together under the one theme of Parables. If this is the case, then I like to think that Jesus took his illustrations from everyday encounters. I imagine Jesus using opportune moments to tell his stories. I imagine him walking in the countryside where, out of the corner of his eye, he spies some fishers sorting out their catch. And so, he points at them and says to his followers:

"See those fishers; the Kingdom of Heaven is like them..."

Or maybe in the marketplace there is a pearl merchant admiring a pearl of particular beauty:

“See him, the kingdom of Heaven is like...”

But what of these discovery parables? Can their differences be significant?

I think yes. So let me explore them a little.

Buried Treasure

In the case of the treasure in the field, the kingdom is found by accident. The person is not looking for treasure – in a sense the treasure finds him.

It was ordinary practice in Jesus’ day before bank notes were invented, for people to bury their savings in the ground. “Buried Treasure” is not just pirate story folklore, it is a real thing of the 1st Century,

(Incidentally when we moved my elderly Mother into a Nursing Home, we found stashes of money all around the house – in the wardrobe, under the mattress, and inside jam tins. As a child of the depression she wasn’t sure

“If you could always trust the banks you know.”)

Anyway, in the parable, finding buried treasure is a surprise. Something of great value suddenly enters your life even when you weren’t looking for it.

Ah could that be how we all fell in love- our partner stumbled into our lives when we least expected so? Maybe I’m just too much of a romantic...!

But that’s how some of us first encountered the Kingdom of Heaven. We weren’t looking for God, but God found us. It was a bit like falling in love. With God, life suddenly became richer,

more meaningful, and more delightful. The buried treasure that was God has suddenly been revealed.

The Mercant Looking for Fine Pearls

Have you ever gone looking for a treasure. I'm sure all of us like to treasure hunt. For some it is gold, and for some it is Lithium (here at Greenbushes). Some seek the best house in the best street, and yet others are on the look out for the one Barbie doll that is missing from their complete set!

But the parable tells us; there's treasure and there's treasure! If something seems missing in your life it probably isn't the Barbie Doll, it's probably the Kingdom of Heaven, the Pearl of great beauty.

(Or as the Greek calls it: *kalous margaritas*! Here's to the beautiful Margaret's in the world!)

The parable is a reference to those who know their life is missing something and are searching. Advertisers know that the common things are- wealth, companionship and vacations. But as we know, Such things can be distorted.

Somehow, when we discover the gift of God's Spirit, our seeking is fulfilled.

Wealth becomes God's gift; companions become fellow creatures made in the image of God; and vacations become holy-days.

Where/who are the beautiful pearls in your life? Take a moment to celebrate them.

The Sorting Fishers

Have you ever sorted through your shed only to discover a lot of junk mixed up with a few precious items?

(Hoarders beware- chuckers now is your moment.)

If we consider this fishing story to have been remembered especially for the members of the early church, I think its talking about:

- beliefs,
- ways of life,
- what's in our hearts and
- even people themselves.

Whilst the church is a great net capable of catching anyone and anything, some sorting out needs to be done. In the early church's time (particularly in Mathew's Jewish flavoured church) there was a sorting out of the old Jewish Law. Which Laws should be kept? Which ones should be thrown out? Famously in Acts 15.27 this process is mention with the final result being:

27We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. 28For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: 29that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.'

Believe it or not that's what our Synod is about too; deciding which Laws are no longer fit for purpose and introducing new ones better suited to our contemporary needs. Law hoarders and Law chuckers have a great field day!

Old beliefs and new beliefs also needed sorting. Particularly the idea that one crucified was not acursed of God (Duet 21.23) but the Messiah. Much of the New Testament is devoted to this problem. Why? So that those new to the church could throw out their old un-helpful

beliefs and take up the new ones. But you know, this is not just a one-off event. If we are honest with ourselves, we are constantly refining what we believe. That's because what we believe must speak into our present life situations; and as these change so does our understanding of God. The same is true of our ways of life. In the end, all Christians have to come to terms with the idea that ultimately, our relationship with God is not about what we believe, but about our life-style and what's in our hearts.

The early Christians were first identified as having something different about them. How's your lifestyle going? I wonder if you've had any belief shifts in your time? Are you suffering from heartburn?

Finally, the Good and Bad fish needed sorting out. Sadly, whilst we long to welcome everyone into our churches, just as the early church had the same longing, the reality of the world tells us that discernment is needed. There are times when we have to exclude the "bad-fish". My desire is that it is not for ever, but sometimes you just have to tell someone to "Go away for a while because they are disrupting the good of the whole".

I say for "a while" as I don't believe in permanent exclusion. The best example I can think of, is when a teacher sends a disruptive student out of the room so the rest of the class can get on with learning. Return to the room then relies on some form of negotiation.

Nevertheless, this is dangerous territory.

We are always in danger of being poor sorters. We only keep those who are like us, or think like us, or never challenge us.

Curiously in Jesus' parable, the sorters are in a team. Perhaps there was a lot of chatter:

conversations about size, toxicity, tastiness and other characteristics pertaining to fish.

Maybe I'm pushing the parable a bit too far but group judgement is seen to be better than individual prejudice.

So the discovery parables.

I wonder what you will discover this week?

Will it be "buried treasure" you weren't looking for?

Will it be "a beautiful pearl of great price."

Will it be life's old rubbish, only to find a few cherished items amongst it?

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.