

Sunday 17A

In the spring of 1947 when two Bedouin boys were shepherding their sheep and goats at Qumran, near the north-western cliffs of the Dead Sea, an animal went missing. One of the boys, searching for it, threw a stone into a small cave in the rock face. When he heard what sounded like breaking crockery he took fright. Later, however, the two boys crept together into the cave – and there on its floor, stuffed into pottery jars, was roll upon roll of crumbling parchment. They had made one of the biggest archaeological discoveries of modern times. They had found the first of the now-famous Dead Sea Scrolls.

One day, some distance north in Galilee, 19 centuries earlier, Jesus, proclaiming the good news of God's dawning kingdom, told a not dissimilar story about the chance discovery of a treasure trove. A farm labourer was ploughing a field when the plough struck a cache of precious coins which, years before, someone had hidden to preserve it from advancing armies or marauding robbers. Having covered his find, he hurried home to scrape up every cent (or maybe shekel) he had to buy the field. (The morality of the man's action is not in question. In Jewish law the finder of the money was the keeper.)

Jesus also told a story about a trader whose business was dealing in pearls. One day he heard of the sort of pearl he had been seeking for years – a pearl without equal. Without more ado he sold all that he had and bought that wonderful pearl.

Matthew has placed these together as a pair of companion parables. There is one central point to both of them. It is this: the kingdom of heaven is of such inestimable worth that it calls for the response of total commitment.

In the parable of the hidden treasure, worth or value is emphasised in that the story designates the find of the labourer as treasure, mentions the labourer's joy over his find, and depicts his preparedness to sell all in order to obtain the field and so the treasure. In the parable of the pearl worth is emphasised in that the pearl is described as one of great value, and the merchant's willingness to sell everything in order to purchase it. The sacrifice or total investment by the labourer and merchant is emphasised in almost identical statements about their going and selling all that they owned in order to buy the field or pearl.

From time to time I enjoy indulging in a bit of nostalgia. I was browsing through a special magazine published by *The Australian* newspaper reflecting on the events of the first 20 years of its publication. I was reminded of the incident in 1966 when Prime Minister Harold Holt visited President Lyndon Johnson in the White House. There for the world to hear Holt said: "I hope there will be a corner of your mind and heart which takes cheer from the fact that you have an admiring friend, a staunch friend that will be all the way with LBJ." I

remember cringing when I first heard this reported – cringing with embarrassment at those who spoke for us overseas.

I remember cringing for another reason the next Sunday when I heard a preacher denounce this statement as idolatrous and say that we could be all the way only with LCJ – which he said stood for the Lord Christ Jesus. It was corny, but his main point was right: total commitment to anyone or anything other than God is idolatrous.

But the two parables we have been considering speak of the value of and total commitment to the kingdom of heaven. It was very early in the history of the interpretation of the New Testament that scholars began identifying the treasure and the pearl not with the kingdom but with Christ himself. There is no real conflict here. As we read the gospels we see that to follow Christ is to be in the kingdom; that the kingdom is where he is; that in fact he embodies the kingdom. It is interesting that, while mention of the kingdom is so common in the gospels, it is hardly mentioned at all elsewhere in the New Testament. The apostles preached Christ rather than the kingdom. In these parables, then, commitment to the kingdom of heaven is commitment to Christ himself.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians about how he had surrendered everything he held dear – all his proud privileges as a Jew – in order to gain the pearl of the kingdom which was Christ. Paul wrote: “I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him... I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.”

So far, then, I have said that commitment to Christ must be total and total commitment ought be only to Christ.

Now we need to add that this commitment is by way of being response. It was the labourer’s response to finding the treasure; it was the merchant’s response to finding the pearl; it was Paul’s response to the risen Christ. And this response is to be clearly distinguished from a purchase price, or an effort put in, in order to achieve a place in the kingdom. The parables were addressed by Jesus to his disciples, to the church. They talk of finding the kingdom (that is, Jesus Christ), and then responding in total self-abandonment.

And one final point. Talk of total commitment, of the great price to be paid, and the uncompromising nature of the word “total”, can lead to a sort of resigned acceptance, a gritting of the teeth in determination. Yet we hear that the labourer responded to his discovery with great joy. And the essential note of the good news that the Christian community proclaimed was not its solemnity, nor its aura of reverence, but its joyfulness. This joy was something that overwhelmed the first Christians; it suffused them. They were not joyful about their commitment. Their commitment and their joy were one.

And if this joy is part of our Christian living, it will (of course) be part of what others see in us. For it is only in joy that the Christian is able to live in full abandon in the kingdom, in Christ.

Fr Ray Hartley

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