

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 30th July 2023

In today's Gospel we hear three more brief parables. Each of them is about discernment: being able to spot something good, and having the courage of your conviction to act.

The farmer in the first story is not looking for treasure. As it isn't his field, we don't quite know what he is doing there in the first place. Anyway, he sees the treasure and immediately knows that he must have it. This is worth everything he has, so he clears himself out to possess it.

If the man who finds the treasure in the first story stumbled upon it quite by chance, while he wasn't in fact looking for anything at all, the second story is different: this is about a dealer in fine pearls. He is looking out for treasure every day, hoping for one of those Antiques Roadshow 'I picked it up for a fiver at a car boot sale' moments. And he makes the discovery of his life. The pearl is not exactly cheap – it is worth as much as everything else he possesses, but he doesn't hesitate, he has to have it.

The farmer finds a treasure that he isn't looking for, but he immediately sees that he just has to have it, it is worth as much as everything that he owns; the pearl-dealer finds the pearl that he has been looking for all his life and he, too, sees that this is a once in a lifetime opportunity, he doesn't hesitate; once again, this is worth everything that he possesses.

One man stumbles on something precious quite by chance, something that he didn't even know existed, and certainly didn't know he was looking for; the other man is rather different; he knew exactly what he wanted, exactly what he was looking for, even if, perhaps, he had despaired of ever finding it. The end result is the same: whether or not they knew what they were looking for, they immediately saw it was of infinite value, and they had to have it.

As I said at the start, these are stories about discernment. Both the men have hearts that are open enough to see that life as they have it now may not be enough; there could be something better. Their open hearts mean that they see the value of the treasure and the pearl, but more than that, their hearts are open to action; they see the value, and without hesitating they act. They must make this treasure, this pearl, their own.

What do these two twin stories tell us? They challenge us to more open-hearted living. They challenge us to aim higher, to expect more from life. They say to us that we make so many priorities in life, we try to nail our colours to so many masts and we try to seek happiness and fulfilment in so many different places, but what if only one were necessary? What if we were able to make life simpler, like the farmer and the pearl-dealer, and swop all those different ideas competing for our attention so that there was just one? What if we were to say that friendship with Jesus Christ was to be our only treasure, worth swopping all the others for? What if we were to let ourselves be filled with joy, as the farmer was in the first parable, and set off in company with our jolly and friendly band of fellow pilgrims to spend more time with Christ, the perfect man; and in spending more and more time with him, to become more like him so that, becoming

more like the one we treasure and whose company we delight in, increasingly we become his presence in our world, we present the risen Christ to the world, and lay the treasure and the pearl in front of people of good will. Telling people about Jesus Christ is a good thing to do, and it may well inspire some of them to set off in search of him; but showing him to people, letting them see what a life taken over by him might look like, this is a whole new level. The best way to spread the Good News is to show people that a life lived close to Christ is the fullest, happiest, richest, most complete and most human sort of life that there is. It is the treasure and the pearl.

There is a third story too, of course: the story of the jumbled up netful of fish. This, too, is a story about discernment, but on this occasion it is God who makes the judgements. Everyone has a chance at belonging in the Kingdom; everyone has a chance to live life to the full. Not everyone will seize that chance, but everyone will be given it. There is no avoiding the fact that one day each of us will be asked to give an account, and to judge for ourselves how well suited we are to life in the presence of God. Inevitably, the ones most suited to life in the presence of God for eternity will be those who have lived this earthly life in the presence of God – the ones who have spotted the treasure and the pearl, and decided they must have them at any cost.

Eternal life matters. It is real, and we want a place in it. The treasure that will lead us there is life at the side of Christ. It is worth swapping everything for that. These stories send me back humbler, asking myself again how and why it can be that I so often see the treasure, shrug, and walk past. It will not do, it really won't.