

17th SUNDAY OF THE YEAR, A, 2020

For obvious reasons, the first two of our three parables of today's Gospel (finding treasure, the pearl merchant) probably speak more to converts to the faith or those who have made grace-filled rediscovery of their faith. Both parables allude to that sense of excitement when one discovers something almost too good to be true: 'is it possibly...? Can it be true? ... It is true!' They also speak quite strongly to those who are called to the priesthood or religious life. The merchant selling all he owns for the pearl of great price is especially apt for one who gives up all they have for a religious vocation.

However, these parables are meant for all members of the Church ('God's kingdom already present in the world' – *Gaudium et Spes*). And we can tell they are because of the third and final parable: the dragnet. That the kingdom of heaven can be compared to fishermen hauling in a dragnet with all kinds of fish means that Jesus is talking about the Church in its earthly, historical reality, where there is a wide variety of people; saints and sinners alike.

As such, then, we are all meant to have the sense of excitement and joy on discovering the kingdom of God on earth, which is our one, holy, Catholic and apostolic faith. I suppose the obvious question to ask ourselves is: do I? If we do, this is surely a sign that something is fundamentally right about our sense of the faith and our practice of it. Going to Mass brings us great joy and consolation (not necessarily in the emotive sense but with a sense of conviction); getting to confession from time to time brings us relief and liberation from our sins; prayer gives us stability in our relationship with God and an awareness of his love for us. If we don't, this is surely a sign that something is fundamentally wrong about our sense of the faith and our practice of it. We probably do not go to Mass when we know we could; we probably rarely go to confession; our prayer lives can be found wanting and we do not seek to understand our faith as much as we ought to.

These are very simplistic and broad brush-stroke distinctions. People's spiritual lives can be more complicated than that. However, for the most part, the broad distinctions remain helpful for they can be accurate, nevertheless. If you ever find your faith wavering or the 'joie de vive' going from the practice of your faith, ask yourself some of those basic questions: when did I last go to Mass? How often do I pray, and for how long? Do I ever get to know my faith better? When was the last time I was at confession? It is often the case that when we answer those questions honestly and openly to ourselves, we begin to see the connections.

However, regarding these parables, it is also worth bearing in mind something that was said in last week's homily: that the kingdom of God is not primarily about us and what we do but about 'what God has done for us in Jesus Christ'. That being so, as well as applying these parables to our own life of faith, we should interpret them in the light of Jesus Christ and not just ourselves. When we do this, the parables invariably become a little clearer and mystical at one and the same time. With the first one, we are not the person who has found the treasure; Jesus is. We are the treasure! Jesus is the one who sells everything he owns (by coming down to our lowly, human state) and buys the field, which is the world of creation. He does this because he considers us to be his most treasured work of creation.

Regarding the second, we are not the pearl merchant who finds the pearl of great price. Jesus is the merchant and we are the pearl of great price! That's why he 'sells everything he owns and buys it'. Jesus gives up his life on the cross for our salvation because he considers humanity to be the pearl of great price – you and me! That is why the third parable now makes more direct sense – that we are

not the fishermen with a dragnet; we are the fish. It is Jesus and the angels who are the fishermen who will separate just from the wicked at the end of time.

In other words, Jesus gives us two extremely flattering parables about how important we are to him; but there is a sting in the tail (if you'll excuse the pun with the fish!) Our importance is not without our own personal responsibilities to respond to him in faith and in love by the way we live our lives.