

Homily for 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2011

We can become very comfortable where we are in our families and communities. We know each other so well at times. We can even wear our differences and arguments like a favourite old tea shirt! The routine of relating to, and dealing with, the familiar people and events in our lives does help us persevere in our life's journey. The down side of it can be, however, that we can forget the initial joy which set us out on a particular journey in the first place, be it a marriage or a career or whatever.

The simplicity of the parables Jesus tells today bring us back to the heart of our life as Christians (Matthew 13:44-52). All the structures and expectations put on us by life, the world, the Church, and especially ourselves, can sometimes get in the way of seeing and embracing the one thing that is needed.

Both the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price were unexpected, unearned, and undeserved. They were stumbled upon in the daily course of events of the people who found them. It is a clear illustration that whatever we might seek, or whatever we might want, what is of ultimate value is always a gift. Grace is at the heart of a Christian view of the world.

That is what Solomon knew and was the source of his wisdom as we heard in the reading from Kings (1 Kings 3:5, 7-12). The truth of his rule as king did not depend on his wealth or power, and he was famous for his wealth, but on God's grace.

Neither the person who found a treasure hidden in a field nor the merchant in search of fine pearls expected what they got. It was a surprise and their response was to leave everything else in order to possess the treasures or pearl. They were prepared to spare no effort or money to do so.

The surprise of those discoveries could also be likened to a first meeting of new friends. That can be an unexpected joy which can change a person's life. Or like the first kiss of lovers. Such events can prompt us to forget about everything else. One's whole life now revolves around this new gift.

Gifts cannot be forced upon someone. Nor can the response of gratitude. Grace is a free gift. And we are also free to accept or reject it. There can be no such thing as a brainwashed Christian or a forced conversion. That would be a contradiction in terms although many have tried such methods.

The pearl of great price has as its heart just such a life changing and empowering love. The love in question that we discover in Jesus is God's love for us. It is a love which is personified in Jesus whole life and death and resurrection. So too he personifies the Kingdom of God.

All Jesus did was in total freedom. He was not just a passive victim of events. He was a passionate prophet of God's Kingdom. This brought him into conflict. He became a scapegoat for the Romans and Jewish authorities alike.

He is for us then the pearl of great price. He is the treasure hidden that we discover and having found him never look back. What are we prepared to sacrifice to attain this gift? That is the question put before us. Hence, the third parable Jesus tells emphasises the crucial importance of continuing that quest otherwise we may lose it all. If love is not the heart of our lives then we have nothing, even if it costs us everything else.

Fr Graham