

## Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

Central to Jesus' teaching was the notion of the kingdom of God. In his first public appearance at the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, he announced that he had come to proclaim the kingdom of God. His purpose was to announce that it was a reality which could be encountered everywhere, it had already arrived and yet there was also something about it which was yet to be realised. That in itself is a difficult idea to deal with: already here but still to come. And that was only a small part of the picture that Jesus wished to convey. One of the key purposes of his preaching was to explain, shed light on and elucidate that notion which was so central to the message he proclaimed. Jesus resorted to parables and today's gospel puts before us two of the simplest and most straightforward of his explanations of the kingdom of God. Jesus was unlikely to keep the theme to the forefront of his preaching unless he believed it important and enriching for those who would hear it and take it to heart.

The two short parables today focus precisely on just how valuable Jesus hoped his listeners would consider it once they knew it was within their grasp. In fact, so valuable was the kingdom of God that all other riches were dispensable and could be sacrificed in the effort to acquire the kingdom. Jesus compared it to a precious pearl, so perfect in shape, size and quality, that the pearl merchant would sell all his possessions in order to purchase it. Jesus also used the image of the treasure trove hidden in a field (the very stuff of so many boy's adventure stories, not least *Treasure Island*) and, once Jesus' imaginary farmer knows this particular field has a treasure buried in it, he sells all his other property to buy this field. The NT is full of parables, some long, others short, some with a message which is immediately obvious, others a little more obscure (the last two weeks in our Sunday gospel we see the disciples prevailing on Jesus to "explain" the parables to them), but all of them highlight some new dimension to the complex idea Jesus strives to get across.

If the large number of people who heard these parables the first day they fell from the lips of Jesus, and unless the impression they made on them had not been deep, it is hardly likely they would have been handed on within the early Christian community down the generations until such a time as they were committed to parchment by Mark, Matthew and Luke. I like to think that each generation struggled to understand the parables. They knew, they sensed that there was a valuable lesson to be learned, and yet just like us two millennia later they grappled with the meaning of these stories. We are as fascinated by the parables as earlier generations were, we too seek to understand their full significance. It is impossible to know how the coronavirus and its aftermath will affect Church and society, beyond our powers at the moment to imagine what the new tomorrow will be like, but I think we can safely say that the teaching of Jesus will enchant our children's children as much as it has done us and that the puzzle of the parables is something they too will take trouble to decipher. It is only when we are fully in it – as one day we pray and hope – that we will understand the richness of the kingdom of God.

**Father Patrick**