



Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time July 24, 2011 A

WHAT IS REALLY IMPORTANT IN YOUR LIFE?

Today's Gospel offers us three parables intended to give the listener some insight into what Jesus calls the *Reign of God*. Jesus does not give us a definition of the *Reign of God*, but instead offers us images of what the *Reign of God* is like.

In the first two parables today, Jesus likens the *Reign of God* to a *buried treasure* or a set of *fine pearls*. In stumbling upon the treasure of pearls, one recognizes a *real find*. "This is what I've been looking for all my life!" Discovering buried treasure or pearls brings us great *joy*. And with it comes a great commitment—shown by our willingness to sell all we have in exchange for the treasure. In the story, both men are willing to joyfully *sacrifice* all to purchase their new-found treasure. No one pushes them to do it; they *want* to do it.

The third parable about the dragnet hauling all kinds of things—good and bad—is similar to last Sunday's wheat and weeds parable. Judgment will only happen at the end when the useful will be separated from the useless. Like the wheat and weeds parable, it cautions against premature judgment, but also serves as a warning that judgment will take place.

Matthew finishes his section on parables by saying: "*Every scribe who is learned in the Reign of God is like the head of a household who can bring from his store both the new and the old.*" Jesus has been speaking to the Pharisees and his disciples, but the Pharisees have become fixated on the *Old Law* (the Torah) that they are unable to appreciate the *new* Word of God spoken through Jesus.

Today, we live in a Church where there is a mixture of the new and the old. The wise person appreciates and draws from both the new and the old to nurture his/her spiritual life. To be fixated on one or the other is a limiting place to be.

Three miscellaneous comments

The term *Reign of God* is not an easy concept to get a handle on. Notice I say "concept" and "get a handle on."

By using "concept," I am rendering the *Reign of God* as a matter of the head, whereas it is primarily a thing of the heart. By using the phrase "get a handle on," I am being a typical westerner with a need to control and/or totally understand something, which is fine. But when it comes to God and his Reign, we are speaking of Someone and Something much bigger than our finite minds can grasp. Having said that, let me share with you a description of the *Reign of God*. It is the right relationship between God and his people. It is the power or rule of God at work in the lives of people in our world. Hence, the *Reign of God* is not an external kingdom but is rather within. The *Reign of God* is happening whenever and wherever individuals or communities submit their lives to Jesus and his values.

Today's first two parables raise an important question for us: *What is really important in our lives? What are our pearls of great price? What epitaph do we want written on our graves?* A simple way to begin to see what is really important to us is to reflect on how we use our *time, energy* and *money*. What drives us? What gets us excited? What do we daydream about? Of course, what we *do* or how we spend our time is more important than what we *talk* or *dream* about.

In a similar vein and building on the first reading, we can ask ourselves: How would we answer if God presented us with the same offer he put to Solomon: "Ask anything of me and I will give it to you." What would we ask for? Would it be an honest response? (Assuming that winning the Lotto is not our wish), we might further ask ourselves: Is what we want something we can get for ourselves? For example, if we seek a more loving heart or a better relationship with someone, do we often pray for that, and have we taken steps to move in that direction? Have we named the obstacles and the actions necessary to attain our goal? If we hardly do anything to get what it is we *say* we most dearly desire, can we genuinely say that this is what we truly want? It is one thing to desire something, it is another thing to be willing to *sacrifice* to get it. St. Augustine said: "Christ is not valued at all unless he is valued *above* all."

Two "fishy" stories with excellent lessons

The Contented Fisherman

The rich industrialist from the North was horrified to find the Southern fisherman lying lazily beside his boat, smoking a pipe.

"Why aren't you out fishing?" said the industrialist.

"Because I have caught enough fish for the day," said the fisherman.

"Why don't you catch more than you need?" said the industrialist.

"What would I do with them?" asked the fisherman.

"You could earn more money," was the reply. "With that you could have a motor fixed for your boat. Then you could go into deeper waters and catch more fish. Then you would make enough to buy nylon nets. These would bring you more fish and more money. Soon you would have enough money to own two boats. Then you would be a rich man like me."

"What would I do then?" asked the fisherman.

"Then you could sit down and enjoy life," said the industrialist.

"What do you think I am doing right now?" said the contented fisherman.

The Blind Fish

"Excuse me," said one ocean fish to another, "you are older and more experienced than I, and will probably be able to help me. Tell me, where can I find this thing they call the Ocean? I've been searching for it everywhere to no avail." "The Ocean? But this is the Ocean," said the older fish. "Oh, this? But this is only water. What I'm searching for is the Ocean," said the young fish, feeling quite disappointed as he swam to search elsewhere.

So often in our search for God we forget that he is all around us. In him we live, move and have our being.

The authentic article

The following reflection is by Fr. Dennis McBride, CSsR.

In both parables both men appreciate the true value of what they have discovered and are willing to pay the cost of everything they have for the new treasure. To outsiders looking at them, the two men might appear totally unhinged in risking everything on this one venture. But both are certain about the wisdom of what

they must do; for them, the folly would be in passing over the main chance. In the parables Jesus is asking the crowds if they perceive the kingdom of God in the same way: do they really see it as a treasure that is worth more than everything they now value in life? If the kingdom of God is not perceived as the authentic article, people will not bother renouncing anything to attain it.

Jesus' own perception of life differed sharply from so many people's. He was constantly challenging people to see and see again in order to understand anew. To that purpose his stories turned much of wisdom on its head, and this was done in the hope that his listeners might catch something of another way of living in God's world. In effect Jesus had what Solomon prayed for—a heart to discern the ways of the people and the ways of God. But more than this, Jesus had the determination to close the gap between the two ways.

We know that Jesus had to give up everything he valued—his family, his home, his security—to do his Father's will and preach the kingdom of God. For Jesus there was no treasure greater than his Father's will: when he uncovered what it was, he renounced everything to make it his own. His own family and neighbors thought his ways either puzzling or foolish; and when he gave up his own life, even his disciples could not understand this ultimate folly. But there was a purpose in it: even in death Jesus kept hold of his treasure.

None of us can gain anything of value without renouncing something. Perhaps what we have to renounce first is our perception of what real treasure in this life really is. Few of us will chance on the crock of gold at the end of the rainbow, or win a lottery, or stumble on an oil-field in the backyard. But we have all stumbled on treasure. Like the two Bedouin shepherd boys, we may have problems appreciating our find wrapped in the ordinary stuff of life. The real treasure of life is under our noses—in the people we share life with, in the opportunities we face very day to exercise the values of Jesus. None of this might appear a glittering prize, but it is in the heart of the ordinary that we discover the presence of Jesus. He is the authentic article. He is hidden in the common-place, hoping that we'll stumble on that truth before long.

Have a blessed week,

