

Parables of the Kingdom: The Treasure and the Pearl

These two short parables of the Kingdom we have heard this morning speak into discovering the worth of the Kingdom. A man finds treasure in a field, a merchant finds a pearl of immense value, both sell all they have, joyfully, to purchase the object of their longing, the object that makes everything else they own seem worthless—like Paul: “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” A common interpretation of these parables is that we are called to discover the kingdom, the pearl of great price, to find the hidden treasure, and count the cost, sell everything we have for it. But since the days of the Church fathers, there has been a dual interpretation of this passage, and the primary interpretation is this: the man finding the treasure, and the merchant is not the spiritual seeker, it is not primarily you or I, rather the merchant/man is Jesus.

The principal meaning of this parable is not that we would discover the thing of immense worth and give all for it. Rather it is that Jesus, the Christ has found something of worth and paid it all. That Christ gave up everything to redeem the hidden treasure! Our epistle reading today could have been Philippians 2, that Christ, being in the very nature God, emptied himself out completely, sold everything he had to buy the treasure in the field. For the joy set before him. The Church—and more than the Church because the Kingdom of God is at work in ways that are bigger than the Church—is Christ’s treasure, the pearl of great price. Restored relationship with you, and me, is the thing of immense value for God, so much so that no expense could be spared. Notice he bought the whole field, not just the treasure. Christ's redemption is that wide!

The second interpretation is dependent on the first. It is only when we come to understand the value that God in Christ has placed upon us, and upon building his Kingdom in and through us, that we come to experience and feel his worth. We love because he first loved us. One who has been forgiven much, loves much. Our New Testament readings witness to two people who had experienced the overwhelming love of God. For Paul, his encounter with God’s love in Christ Jesus led him to say, “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish...” Rubbish is an inoffensive, clean translation of what has been argued is the Greek equivalent of the “S” word. *Skubalon* means waste, but especially filth and excrement. This is not about Paul hating everything, but comparative value, between knowing Christ, and any other good.

And our reading from Acts covers the final moments of Stephen’s life, the Church’s first martyr. In Acts 6, when Stephen is first seized and brought before a kangaroo court, the text says his face was like the face of an angel. The face of someone who has found the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price. Knowing that his Lord Jesus Christ had died forgiving those who were killing him, so too, Stephen gripped by the surpassing worth of Jesus, was able to emulate his master. And I wonder about the link

between these two readings. Immediately after the death of Stephen, which we have heard Paul (known as Saul) was present at, Saul will go on a journey and have his own encounter with the risen Christ. And a follower of Jesus, Barnabas, will come to him to extend forgiveness for his persecution of the Church. Will build a bridge across their difference and hostility and call him “brother.” While we attribute Paul’s conversion to his “Damascus Road experience,” how much did witnessing Stephen’s execution, (witnessing this man who was clearly a window into the worth of Christ and his Kingdom) how much did that impact Paul being open to Christ breaking into his life? I wonder who witnessed Christ’s worth to you? **Do we know how much people are watching us, to see what is of worth?**

Through this short series, we wanted to hear from people and their experiences of the Kingdom of God at work in their lives. I want to share a brief testimony on behalf of Yousef. Many of you will know Yousef. Yousef is here every Tuesday and Thursday assisting and connecting with people from the ESOL community. He is often out and about in the neighbourhood, meeting migrants and inviting them to come along to the ESOL classes. We invited Yousef to share, but for a few reasons he didn’t want to come up here, so I interviewed Yousef on Thursday, and he was happy for me to share his experience of discovering the treasure that is the Kingdom of God.

Yousef’s Story

- When he was a young man, he had an opportunity to study in Bethlehem. In the Church in Bethlehem he experienced the power of the Holy Spirit that shook him physically.
- 25 years ago, came to NZ. Had to leave for fear of his life, and gave up everything to get here.
 - Life was complicated. He could not do what he was used to doing. He did not have his family. Career. He had nothing.
 - He had heard people say that NZ was a green oasis, but for him it was a desert.
 - This brought upon depression, and lots of medication to help with his mental health.
- Then someone invited him to come to St Georges.
- Here he met David and Lynette Wood, who invited him into their home. Welcomed him as part of the family.
- When going through a difficult time, he came to Josh for prayer, felt seen and love in his eyes, and when Josh prayed for him, he shook just like he had years ago in Bethlehem. His physical body had been experiencing a burning sensation but felt cooling when he received prayer.
- He knew that he had found his home. He had not connected with anyone in NZ, but here in the Church, he was welcomed and included. It was only when he started coming to church did he feel like he was in NZ.
- Since joining the Church, his reliance and need for as much medication has decreased.
- Another time, Yousef was having security issues with his house. He wanted to leave immediately. But he invited some of us from the Church to come and pray, and a peace descended upon him. He learnt that prayer is most true and effective, not when it is performance, but when it comes from the depths of our being, from the raw places of our lives. It is at these times, when we have rid ourselves of every other thing we might turn to, and pray

with desperation, that we experience real prayer. His encouragement to us: “If you want to see God: be real. Open up your real selves, give up everything else, and pray.”

- Recent testimony: Had been offered a Kāinga Ora house that was far away out south. He refused because he didn't want to be far away from his “family home” – the Church community. They said, “OK, but it will be at least another year before any other offer comes your way.” We prayed, and within days they had called back, had a meeting with Kāinga Ora with Malcolm, and then just this week they offered him a home nearby.
- When I asked him, what was finding the treasure of the Kingdom like, he said that being a part of the Church is life. That to live outside of this praying Kingdom of God is like “living in a house without the lights on. The Church is God's house.”

I love that. Thank you Yousef for allowing me to share your story. And I want to honour you for the work you do, building bridges across cultural differences, inviting people to come and taste and see something of the Kingdom here. We want to be clear; we are not sharing these stories because there is something special about St Georges. This is Kingdom of God stuff, that transcends us here at St Georges and is even bigger than the Church. The Kingdom of God is wherever we allow the reign of God in our lives. We simply want to be a part of what God is doing in our little corner of the Kingdom.

We're also going to hear from Bruce Nicholls. It is Bruce's 99th birthday this week, and we wanted to honour him, he wondered why we wanted to celebrate his 99th and not wait till next year! But for those who don't know, Bruce is a prolific as ever. Still writing and publishing books, and still ministering at various churches. Bruce and his wife Kathleen were missionaries in India, he was teaching there for 20 years and then involved in church ministry for 20 years in Punjab. And so we've asked Bruce to briefly share his experience of the worth of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God, how this worth has sustained him for 9 decades of faith and how we can witness (even across cultural differences) to the supreme treasure of Christ to our neighbours.

Bruce to share (3-4 minutes).

Thank you Bruce (honour and weave something of Bruce's testimony into theme).

Paul counted everything rubbish in comparison to knowing Christ. Stephen saw heaven open and stood there unafraid. Yousef refused a house because he wouldn't move away from where he'd found life. And Bruce has given his life, decade after decade, to making this worth known to others from different religious and cultural backgrounds.

Hidden treasure. Pearl of great price. One found almost accidentally, and one found by a merchant who knew what they were looking for. What are these parables saying? That Christ looked at us, the whole broken, wandering human family and said: *that is worth everything I have, I'll take the whole field.* When we see what we are worth to him, we discover what he is worth to us.

Yousef said it simply: *living outside this is like a house without the lights on.*

That's what we are called to witness to our neighbours. Not a program. Not a service. Not even a community. But to experience the Kingdom of God, to taste and see the supreme worth of Jesus Christ. But it is through the community is where it becomes real, where someone's eyes communicate love, where a table is opened, where prayer is raw and real.

Perhaps you are here this morning, and you think perhaps you are discovering something of great value. You don't fully know what you've found until you've staked something on it. It is not good admiring the pearl from a distance, it is meant to be yours. Maybe you're still searching for the treasure, and not sure if you have found it, or maybe you recognise there are things you need to sell to purchase the thing that makes everything else seem worthless.

If you're somewhere in that territory today; curious, searching, aware that something is missing, then we want you to know you are not on the outside of this story. You may be exactly where the man in the field was, just before he found it. If that's you and you'd like to talk, or to pray, or just to say *I think I might be looking for this*, come talk after the service. If you don't feel like it is something you can do right away, then scan the code in the newsletter and select the option that you would like to meet.

If your sense of the worth of the Kingdom has waned and want to discover afresh the value of the Kingdom, please do come and pray with the prayer team after the service.