

MATTHEW 13.44-46: THE TREASURE AND THE PEARL

[Chelmsford 5 December 2010]

Do you ever dream of winning the lottery?

What a difference a cool £10 million would make!

Or if not the lottery, wouldn't it be great if some unknown distant relative were suddenly to leave us £10,000. That too would make a difference.

Indeed, if the bank were to inform me that as a result of a computer error it owed me £1000, that too would make a difference.

Yes, we could all do with a windfall.

i. The buried treasure

Jesus once told a parable of *a man who had a wonderful windfall*.

No, he didn't win the lottery, nor was he remembered by some distant aunt, nor did the bank find in his favour. *He stumbled on some treasure..*

Imagine the scene: there he is, a farmer is ploughing a field, when suddenly his ox slips into a hole – the foot of the animal knocks against a jar and smashes it open. To the farmer's amazement he discovers that the jar contains a great cache of precious coins or jewels. What a wonderful find!

It sounds a little far-fetched. And yet not really. In ancient world there were no banks for ordinary people. If you had money or valuables of one kind or another, then the safest thing to do was to bury them in the ground.

This was particularly true in Palestine.

For Palestine was one of the most fought over countries in the world.

When the tide of war threatened to flow over them & engulf them, it became standard practice for ordinary people to hide their valuables in the ground, before they took to flight, in the hope that the day would come when they could return and regain them.

Josephus, the Jewish historian, wrote of: "*the gold and silver which the Jews treasured up underground against the uncertain fortunes of war*".

To return to our story: *the farmer literally strikes lucky*.

What does he do? Making sure no one has seen him, he shovels back the earth on the treasure and hurries home to scrape up every penny to buy the field.

The implication is that he was simply a tenant farmer - the field did not actually belong to him.

Perhaps his behaviour seems highly immoral to us, but in fact it was quite the proper thing to do in those days. According to the Rabbis, "*finders*" were "*keepers*".

Still, that's not the point Jesus is trying to make: the punch-line of the story as far as Jesus was concerned was: "**he is so happy that he goes and sells everything he has and buys that field**" (v44).

ii. The priceless pearl

Jesus then told another story, not all that different from the story of the hidden treasure.

The hero of this story is quite a different type from the humble peasant farmer. He is a dealer in fine pearls, who moved in the upper echelons of society. Pearls then, as now, and were highly prized and pretty pricey to say the least.

- **Julius Caesar** presented the mother of his friend Brutus with a pearl worth 6 million sesterces – £1 million in our money.
- **Cleopatra** is said to have owned a pearl worth 100 million sesterces - £16 million in our money.

According to Jesus, the dealer in the story came across a pearl of equal value - if not even of greater beauty. What does he do? "**He goes and sells everything he has and buys that pearl**".

His friends at first must have thought him mad. But to the dealer, it was more than worth it. He had actually got a bargain.

The Kingdom of heaven, says Jesus, is like this. A man happens to find treasure hidden a field... Again, the Kingdom of heaven is like this. A man is looking for fine pearls...

What was Jesus saying about the Kingdom of God through these two stories?

1. LIFE IN GOD'S KINGDOM IS PRICELESS

Life in the Kingdom of God, says Jesus, is the most precious experience imaginable - it is priceless.

Look at the two parables again. ***The one thing common to both is that the farmer and the merchant find something of great value.*** Indeed, it is so valuable that it is worth selling everything one has in order to possess it.

Or to put it another way, to experience the life that God offers us, is to hit the jackpot. It's worth more than a King's ransom - it's worth everything.

This is not to deny that there are other good things in life –

- At this time of the year many of us find our lives enriched by pantomimes – or if you are more high brow, then maybe it is the ballet. Or maybe it is the theatre or the concert hall which means so much to you.
- Having just returned from NZ, Caroline and I grateful for the opportunity of travel. We greatly enjoy travel to distant places.
- Then, of course, there are relationships: where would we be without friends and family?

Yes, in so many ways we find our lives enriched.

Yet compared to Jesus, all these enriching experiences are of limited value.

Jesus - and the life Jesus offers - surpasses everything else.

How so?

- ***Jesus offers something which meets our deepest need*** – he offers us a new life where the past with all its failures can be put behind us, and where God is experienced as Father. Yes, with Jesus, we find forgiveness and fulfilment, satisfaction and meaning.

- ***Jesus offers something of permanent value*** - nothing else stands the test of time - for a while we may find fulfilment in art, music & literature - or we may find fulfilment in relationships within & without the family - but ultimately we must give up all these things, for at the end of the day we must die. But the life Jesus offers goes beyond the grave.

No wonder we read that the farmer "**so happy**" that he went and sold all that he had. He gladly gave up everything he had - it was worth every penny.

That was also the Apostle Paul's experience. When writing to the church at Philippi he used some pretty graphic language to describe the difference Jesus made to him: "***Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, first-hand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant - dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I can embrace Christ and be embraced by him***" (Phil 3.8, The Message)

Can you say that? If not, then you have yet to truly experience Christ - you have yet to stumble across the hidden treasure - you have yet to find the pearl of great price.

2. LIFE IN GOD'S KINGDOM IS FOUND IN DIFFERING WAYS

These twin parables teach us that ***there is no one way in which people come to discover the life in God's Kingdom.***

- In the parable of the farmer who stumbles across treasure in a field, his wealth comes to him quite unexpectedly - like winning the lottery
- In the second parable, the dealer only finds the pearl of great price after a long search.

There are some who just stumble across Jesus, as it were. They walk into a church on a whim and all of a sudden discover the wonderful difference that Jesus makes to life.

On the other hand, there are others who only become Christians as a result of searching – for some attending an Alpha course is part of that search.

There is no one way of discovering the life God offers in Jesus.
What counts is that, one way or another, we find Jesus
Have you discovered this life?

3. LIFE IN GOD'S KINGDOM IS WORTH EVERYTHING

I first wrote in my notes: "*The kingdom of God is so valuable that it is worth sacrificing anything (and everything) to get it*".

But on reflection that is wrong. It is not a matter of "sacrificing anything and everything" in order to experience life in the kingdom of God.

It is true that both the farmer and the merchant sold everything they had, but they weren't making a sacrifice - they were acting out of ***self-interest*** - they were buying something far greater.

They didn't have to struggle with whether or not they should sell everything - they were delighted to have the opportunity! It was the chance of a life-time.

So what does this say to us?

Life in God's kingdom is worth everything.

Life in God's kingdom may demand our all, but we are fortunate in having the opportunity of securing what is there

I believe that we have here an important perspective on the Christian life.

Yes, Jesus does make demands - he demands our all – he demands that we take up our Cross and follow him.

Far too many people regard Christianity as an extra to life - a bit like air-conditioning in a modern car - on a sweltering hot summer's day it may be very pleasant to have, but frankly it is not essential - indeed, most of us manage to make do without air-conditioning.

But Christianity ***is not about special extras*** - its not about enhancing our present quality of life – ***It's about having life turned upside down.***

For when a person becomes a Christian, a revolution takes place - we undergo a change of ownership - Jesus becomes ***Lord*** of our lives.

But we've got a wrong perspective on Jesus, if we kid ourselves that we are making sacrifices. Sacrifice is not the name of the game - for life in God's kingdom is worth everything we have got, and more. We could not make a better investment.

We should count ourselves fortunate to be given a share in God's Kingdom.

This certainly is the experience of many of us here. It is also true of ***Alan & Anna.***

But to know that forgiveness, to experience that life, we must first give our all to him. All this is symbolised in the act of baptism.

As Anna & Alan are baptised, they will be symbolising their commitment to Jesus.

As they go under the water, they will be saying not just: “*Yes, Lord Jesus, you died for me, you gave yourself for me*”; they will also be saying, “*Yes, Lord, I resolve to die to self, to give myself to you – now and forever*”.

The fact is that Jesus demands all – but he gives all.

Life in the Kingdom of God may be likened to a ***fabulous hoard of treasure*** – or to an ***amazingly beautiful pearl*** – ***there is nothing else which may compare to it - and it is worth everything we have to receive.***

But whereas in the two parables, only one person could gain the treasure – only one person could buy the pearl – the goodness is that God's offer of life in the Kingdom of God is open to us all – it is not just for Anna & Alan – it is for your and for me.

Jesus died for you – he gave his life for you – that you might be forgiven – that you might know God and the life he has to offer.

Let me encourage you this morning to ***see*** the wonder of what God has done for you in Jesus – and seeing, then ***take action.***

The fact is that there is a decision to be made.

The gospel of the kingdom isn't a pleasant religious idea that you might like to explore for an hour or so one Sunday morning

It isn't like an attractive object in a museum that you might visit & look admiringly at.

- It's like a fabulous hoard of treasure – yours for the taking – provided you give everything you have got
- It's like the biggest, finest, purest pearl – yours for the taking – provided you give everything you have got

My question is: Will you?