**Finding** **the** **pearl**

**Psalm** **119:129-135,** **145** **Matthew** **13:44-45,** **51-52**

The Kingdom of Heaven is like this: a man, nearly a 100 years old went out to walk with his zimmer frame wanting to raise a £1000 pounds fora good cause. But when he found that the much needed money keptpouring in wellbeyond hisexpectations,hesummonedallhisstrength and keptwalking untilhe raised millions and millions of pounds. And there was great celebration and much joy and the monarch of his country honoured him with a knighthood.

Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like this: a carehome worker was trying to look after her patients with true devotion,butwhen a devastatingpandemic hitherworld and a generallockdown was introduced, she needed to make a hard choice. In the event she decided to leave her family and friends, everything dear to her and she remained with the frail, vulnerable residents of the carehome, whose only hope was that their carers wouldn’t abandon them.

Well, if Jesus were to address a current day audience, I wonder if he might use parables like these. This is not as far fetched as it may sound, because even in his own day, Jesus was very much tuned in to the contemporary problems of his time. If we understood Matthew’s narrative in a literal sense, when he is talking about the Kingdom of Heaven, it would be easy to think that Jesus’ teaching was to do wih the afterlife. But, if we knew that for a devout Jewish readership the naming of God was forbidden, then we would realise that Matthew was merely using the acceptable language of his time and that Jesus was really referring to the Kingdom, or the reign of God, as it could be percieved in everyday life.

And that was a burning issue in first century Palestine. Under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire the Jewish people kept alive their faith and received their hope from Scripture passages, which talked of God as their true King rather than the Emperor. The God, who had not forgotten them even in the depth of their suffering and who had promised to send a Liberator to rescue them. The ungoing debate was about the nature of this Kingdom and the identity of the person who would fulfil that promise.

So, Jesus joins the debate and gives people his vision of the kingdom. No wonder that people flocked to hear him! But, his teachings were never simplistic. Sometimes we wish they were! Like his audience, we too would prefer clear-cut instructions, but Jesus follows the practice of the ancient sages of his people and tells stories instead, leaving his hearers to work out the meaning for themselves.And there is plenty to work on! Just in this 13th Chapter of Matthew’s Gospel there are some 7 different parables about the Kingdomof God, and this, by no means is the sum total of Jesus’teachings on the subject. What is it then, this rule of God, which was so central to Jesus’ ministry? And how does it affect us now, when by all accounts our lives are ruled by other powers, like the threat of the devastating Covid-19 virus and Government edicts to regulate our every move.

Let’s see what two of the parables read to us from Matthew’s Gospel tell us about the Kingdom: the treasure found in a field and the priceless pearl purchased by a merchant. On the surface the two stories are quite similar: there is a treasure and on finding it the main characters are willing to sell everything they have in order to buy it. The simple lesson being: The Kingdom of God is something so valueable that it surpasses everything else we may possess and we should be prepared to give up all for its sake.

But then we notice subtle differences. In the first story there is no indication that the man would’ve been looking for a treasure. Perhaps he is a farmer, or more likely a labourer, who works on the land. He virtually trips over the precious thing in the course of the ordinary routine of his life. The merchant, on the other hand, is actively searching for pearls, he spent his life in selling and buying them, he is an expert and when he finds this particular pearl he knows what an unbelieveably special thing it is. I find this quite encouraging, because I take it to mean that there isn’t one simple definition of the highest purpose in life, or of the way to discover it. Take the long days of the Lockdown behind us. Some of us knew exactly what we wanted to achieve with the extra time we were given and started to work towards it. What a joy it was when we succeeded! Others of us carried on with our ordinary activities yet to our great surprise we too have discovered unexpected treasures.

The parable of the priceless pearl also gives us an interesting point to ponder, the pearl, itself may not stand for the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom – we read - is like ‘*a* *merchant* *looking* *out* *for* *fine* *pearls’* and finding it sells everything he has and buys it. So the Kingdom is not the thing itself, the treasure or the pearl, the freedom or the vaccine, but what happens to it, the seeking of it, the holding out for it, the recognition of it and what follows after finding it. And just two short aspects of this great enterprise of finding the Kingdom, or for the Kingdom to find us, - if you like.

One is: it is bound up with change, TRANSFORMATION. The merchant, once he sold everything he had, can not be a merchant anymore. Now that he has the precious pearl, he has nothing else to trade with, he will have to find another way to live. That is an important hallmark of the Kingdom, it changes us, it alters our priorities. It puts our feet on a different path. It makes us give up things. It is a risky business. So, the questions for us may be: are we risking anything for God’s Kingdom? And if, in the Lockdown, we have experienced changes for the better, are we able to hold on to those changes once the Lockdown over?

And the other aspect of the Kingdom is JOY. The man in the field who stumbles over the treasure goes out *in* *joy* to sell everything so that he may obtain it. At this time, perhaps more than ever before we can appreciate the value of joy. We hear the daily statistics of the lives lost to the pandemic. We feel people’s pain of grief, of separation, of loneliness. We recount the names of those we have lost in our church family. Yet, in the middle of it all, the Kingdom unexpectedly finds us and gives us joy. Joy in the family and friends around us, joy in nature, in music and arts, joy in our own creativity. What else can we do, but be thankful and worship our true King? Then go out and do everything in our power to share that joy with others so that the Kingdom may become a reality in their lives too. Let it be so.