

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

## **KINGDOM PICTURES**

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

**Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> August 2010**

Psalm 78:1-4

Matthew 13:44-46

Today we have read four different picture-type parables, all to do with the kingdom of heaven. These are not stories like the parable of the sower or the parable of the weeds, but little pictures, each designed to show one aspect of the Kingdom.

The first two go together. The parables of the treasure hidden in a field and the pearl of great price are two pictures which make similar points. In both cases the kingdom of heaven has to be discovered, it is not obvious. Jesus is again making the point he has made before that, contrary to popular expectation, when he talks of the kingdom of heaven he is not talking about some apocalyptic event. The kingdom has to be discovered; and once it is found, it is worth sacrificing all for. In both parables the kingdom of heaven is seen to be of supreme value.

We get that point very well from the first story, about the man who finds the treasure hidden in a field. In other parts of the U.K. when people go out with metal detectors, hoping to find a hidden treasure they should know that if they find something of value then, unless they have reached an agreement with the owner of the land, any finds will belong to him. (It's a bit more complicated in Scotland) It was similar in Jesus' times. In Jewish law, if the man had lifted that treasure out of the ground it would have belonged to the owner of the field. To own the treasure he must first own the field - even if it takes all he has to gain it. And to get that field he is not reluctant, but joyful to sell all that he has. He rushes off to rid himself of everything he has previously cherished and worked for. He can't wait. His friends or family must have thought he was out of his mind, but he knows what he is doing and there is an urgency and excitement about it.

The kingdom of heaven is worth infinitely more than the cost of discipleship, and those who know where the treasure lies joyfully abandon everything else to secure it. It may look like a hard choice to make, but once we have seen the supreme worth of being part of God's kingdom, there is nothing else we want to do.

We live in times which tend to want to encourage us to hold back from making such all-embracing commitment to our faith. Public bodies are encouraged to consider the value of different faiths. Children in school are encouraged to consider the value of different faiths. And it is not wrong that we should be aware of what other people believe. But what shouldn't be the result is that people end up with the idea that different religions and the experiences they offer are of equal worth. Or that they are like a set of pearls which you can collect. Jesus says that that is nonsense. There is only one treasure worth having, one pearl of great price.

With the parable of the pearl, the merchant is someone whose business is in pearls. He doesn't necessarily value pearls for their beauty, but for what they can provide for him in terms of a livelihood. He buys and he sells. But this time he is so captivated by what he sees, what he has discovered that he is going to buy to keep. He can't afford it, he is going to have to cease trading. He is going to put his whole livelihood on the line. Good business sense tells him he should always keep something by him, should never put all his eggs into one basket, but he does. God's kingdom is not about good business sense - though we too often approach our faith as though it were, holding back from free and full commitment. God's kingdom is about love. Who is it, what sort of person, who commits their whole life to one thing, without fear, without a backward glance? It is the one who loves.

Sing hymn 358 "The great love of God is revealed in the Son"

Read Matthew 13:47-53

The first two pictures are of us, if you like. The treasure finder and the merchant show us how Jesus hopes we will respond when we uncover the great value of the kingdom of heaven. He hopes we will simply fling ourselves head-first into being a part of it, letting our belonging change our previous values.

The third picture is of the fisherman sorting his nets. Now it is not a picture of us but of God. The first two pictures were of how we should - how we will respond when we really discover the wonder of the kingdom of heaven. This is a picture of the kingdom from God's perspective. His kingdom is like a net. There are all sorts of people who get caught up in it, not just those who know what it is they are getting into. This is the parable of the weeds all over again. God knows that there more in his net than good fish. He knows that as the kingdom grows and spreads - like a net thrown on the sea grows as it expands with the weight of the fish in it - so there will be people who are hangers-on to the kingdom, people who are affected by the work of the kingdom but who are not like that merchant or that treasure seeker. In terms of the agricultural parables, there will be those who seem to be growing but do not produce fruit: they don't change, they don't live for their Lord.

And so in this age God's kingdom will never be perfect and complete on the earth, and God knows it. His reign will never be unchallenged, his ways will never be unswervingly followed. But the kingdom of heaven is not just for this age. It begins now, yes, but in this age it is simply catching and preparing people for the age to come, for the fulfilment of the kingdom. The catching and preparing will make a difference to those caught, and will make a difference to the world, but it's not the whole story. There will come a sorting time.

The point of this picture for the church, is perhaps to remind us that as agents of the kingdom our task is to reach out to all and sundry. The sorting is not our responsibility, we who will ourselves be sorted. God will determine when and how we are sorted when he renews his creation.

At this point, Jesus asks his disciples if they have understood, and they say "Yes". I don't think that Matthew is agreeing that the disciples have understood. It is in fact unlikely that they could have fully understood. But they think that they have. And maybe they have got the general drift: listening to all these stories and seeing the pictures in their minds, maybe they have got the some of the idea. They have a glimmer of understanding that the kingdom is not about an apocalyptic event in the first instance, that it is about things growing and changing gradually, that it encompasses all sorts of people, some of whom you might feel ought to be thrown out, only throwing others out is not the job of the children of the kingdom.

There will be an apocalyptic event, the end of the age: to this extent the old teaching of the old scribes is right, and then God will make the separation, but until then, the kingdom of God is the treasure, the prize beyond value or price. Maybe the disciples have understood a little of this, and if so, "therefore" Jesus has a task for them. If they have understood some of it then they have become like scribes - explainers and teachers - of the kingdom. And they are to bring out not just the old, but also the new.

What Jesus has been teaching is new. What Jesus is doing and what he will do is new. What he will make of his role as Messiah is totally new. But it is not divorced from the old. In fact it makes the old new. He gives the old texts and expectations new life, new importance. As he, and his disciples - and so through the ages the church - teach and model the new, the old will be seen in a different light.

That means that how we look at the Old Testament will be changed, in the light of what Christ made of it - and Matthew is perhaps the gospel writer who makes that point most forcibly, taking Old Testament texts and showing them in new contexts. As Christians we look at the Old Testament very differently from the way the Jews do. For Jews it is a record of God's selecting them as a chosen people, with a land, and his dealings with and promises to them. For us it is an unfolding history of God's involvement with humanity, the pinnacle of his creation, made in his image. We read of God's dealings with the Jews - and with others - as the prologue to his coming in Christ to bring all peoples into his kingdom, as chosen.

Bringing out the new with the old also means how we look at the history of the church is changed, so that we need not always now think that what happened in the past was the best, or was right (we needn't defend the Crusades in modern terms, for instance), but we can see how a growing and developing sense of what it means

to live in God's Kingdom has changed the world and continues to do so.

Seeing the old in the light of the new means also that how we look at our own past is changed, changed as we let the light of Christ shine on them. That can bring great healing. Next week we will be looking further at what Jesus might have meant when he said that "the Kingdom of God is within you."

But old or new, past or present, the kingdom of God has always been worth giving one's all for. Jesus gave his all, and God asks us to give our all too. He asks us to seek first his kingdom, to let being his child be the most important thing in our lives and then live as that priority takes us. God goes with us on the adventure!

Amen.