

What is the kingdom of heaven like? Jesus seems to have a lot of different answers to that question in today's Gospel! The kingdom of heaven is like a pearl, like a treasure, like a net full of fish -- and the fishermen who heard Jesus, whose very life depended on the catch in their net, understood this value. Everything but everything is as nothing before the great treasure of possessing or belonging to this kingdom. Jesus was proclaiming to those poor Galileans that to know the love of God, to know that our God is a God of mercy and justice who cares for the poor and the hungry and the dispossessed is to belong to the kingdom. This is the greatest treasure, he tells them and us. This knowledge of God is so life giving, that in order to possess it, we must be willing to give everything else up -- everything!

"He went and sold all that he had and bought the Pearl of Great Value".

Interestingly, and possibly intended in this parable, is the fact that pearls come from under the water; they are lowly, and in Jewish culture, have unclean origins (in Leviticus, God told the Jews to consider anything from the water that did not have fins and scales to be an abomination). Yet, they are brought above the water and freed from the unclean flesh and elevated in worth to the status of a precious gem.

The pearl is said to be of great price or extreme value. As sinners, it can be difficult for us to see how this can be a picture of us. After all, doesn't God call the foolish, weak, base, and despised? True, but our sin-debt is so great that it takes a great price to free us. The merchant man, sells all that he has to buy us.

There is very little to a pearl. Crush it and all you'll have is lime...ordinary chalk. The value of the pearl is how it comes into existence. It is not carved or cut like a diamond or ruby...matter of fact, if you cut a pearl it becomes worthless.

It is created in the heart of a living oyster, in the deep dark of the sea, as an irritant such as a grain of sand is introduced inside the shell. It begins to cut and dig in to the tender inner tissues of the oyster, and it is then that it secretes a substance called Nacre, aka Mother of Pearl. Layer upon layer is formed around that grain of sand until it is a beautiful pearl.

A pearl is formed by accretion--not mechanically, but vitally, just as God gives the church new life as souls are saved! "Upon this rock I will build My Pearl!" Think about it: **the pearl is the oyster's answer to that which wounded it.** The pearl owes its existence to the oyster's willingness to cover that which had cut it.

There is a pearl for everyone. And there is a price for everyone to pay. A price tailored to each individual circumstance. Detachment is that price. To be able to walk away from what we cherish most without so much as a glance back with regret. Our tragedy is **not** that we cannot find the pearl but that we are unwilling to pay the price.

These kingdom parables are so important to us because each points to the hidden-ness of God's reign in our midst. They each suggest that the life of faith begins with something as small as a little bit of yeast or a single grain of mustard seed (or even a little bit of grit!). Like the yeast, this faith of ours often remains hidden and unseen – unrecognized.

Is this not why the disciples ask Jesus for more faith before he sends them out into the world to continue the work of the kingdom. But Jesus replies, "You just need a little bit of faith. With just the smallest amount of faith you can move mountains. With just a little bit of faith you can raise the dead. With just a little faith you will do the things that I do, and greater things than these will you do!"

It does begin with faith. But all we really need is faith as small as a mustard seed to make the whole creation new. To give new life to our own tired bodies. To put a smile on the face of a stranger. To plant seeds of God's love throughout the neighbourhood in which God has made his home.

Many years ago, commenting on The Parables of the Kingdom, "The Pearl of Great Value", the author said that *our God is a very frugal God and does not waste one iota, not one jot or tittle, of our life experience. Each moment we live and breathe on this fragile Earth, our island home, God values and savours who we are and what we are doing – especially the work we do for God's kingdom.*

"He went and sold all that he had and bought the Pearl of Great Value".

A hidden truth embedded in the Good News of Jesus, and hidden in these parables like yeast in dough, is that at the end of the day each one of us is the Pearl of Great Value. To show how much our God loves us, he sends his only Son to walk among us, dwell among us.

So much does God savour our life experience that he did not let us get away with killing his Son, his only Son whom he loves, but returned him to us, so that wherever communities of Christians gather in his name, Jesus himself is in the midst of them, calling us back to the God from whence we come: We come from love, we return to love, and love is all around. We are God's beloved.

We are urged to think of ourselves as Pearls of Great Value, hidden in this world, for which God was willing to pay a great price: the ultimate price. He sold all that he had to obtain us, to retain us, to bring us home to him.

So precious are we in the eyes of our God, that we really need to take time each day in our prayers to allow God the time to thank us for what we have done for God today. Every day we are to sit in silence in our prayer time and allow ourselves to feel God thanking us for all that we do for God in this world.

We do not need to do big and heroic things. Though in truth, as God's own pearls of great value, every little thing we do brings a smile to God's face. And the more we let God thank us for what we can do for God, the more confident and empowered we become as God's own people. And soon the people around us and the people we meet begin to feel like pearls of great value as well.

Are we really capable of believing and knowing that God loves us that much? Can we feel like Pearls of Great Value? It is central to the life of faith to accept and receive God's love – to know how much our God values us and everything that we do.

The life of faith begins with accepting God's love into our hearts, minds, and souls. Without that, we are nothing. With it we become Pearls of Great Value.

"He went and sold all that he had and bought the Pearl of Great Value".

The Kingdom of Heaven is an incredible way of living in the poverty of spirit which gives everything away to be replaced by the Spirit of God, and throughout the entirety of Christian history, Christ has never had a follower who was not called to make extreme sacrifices. Men and women have died for the name of Christ; some have been abandoned by their family and culture. But no matter how extreme, we are all called to “come out and be separate.” The supreme worth of God’s rule calls for us to divorce ourselves from our natural, selfish inclinations. And this is a costly, difficult, and ongoing process.

All too often the priceless value of the kingdom is muted because our lives are saturated with the colours of the world. We can’t truly appreciate the beauty and value of the kingdom until it is all we have; and we will not comprehend its greatness until it is all we want – until we are willing to give everything in exchange for it. Can we afford The Pearl of Great Value, or are we too poor!

Poverty is usually a negative term, and the poor are often despised. We should not let an African famine or a faraway disaster make us forget that poverty is also named as a *beatitude*. It is no accident that Christ began his Sermon on the Mount with “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (*Blessed are those who have no spirit of their own because they are so filled with the Spirit of God*). This is background to the call to “leave all things.” Any modern equivalent of the rich young man might consider what he or she might give, to gain the Pearl of Great Price. The trouble with most of us is that we want it both ways. All this and the good life too.

Thomas Merton once said, “*our intention cannot be completely simple unless it is completely poor. It seeks and desires nothing but the supreme poverty of having nothing but God. True, anyone with a grain of faith realizes that to have God and nothing else besides is to have everything in Him. But between the thought of such poverty and its actualization in our lives lies the desert of emptiness through which we must travel in order to find Him*”. Who

“.....went and sold all that he had and bought the Pearl of Great Value”!!