

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 26 July 2020

O God, our guide, set your path clearly before us and lead us to follow you willingly for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Romans 8:26-39; Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

A reckless merchant – or is s/he really reckless?

For three Sundays, we are exploring the kingdom of God through parables. In part one, we talked about the reign of God through a sower who freely scattered the seeds regardless of the soil conditions. In the end, we learned that the sower was not careless. He not only had faith in his seeds but also, he was working diligently in his field till the harvest. In part two, the seed and the weeds in the same field were our focus. As Jesus explains it, at the macro level, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed is the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one.”¹ But at the micro-level, the good seed and the weeds grow together in each of us. The seed that is the word of God or Christ Jesus has to compete with the weeds – our selfish self by working hard for water, nutrients and the sunlight. The good seed overcomes the weeds and bears fruit – the fruit of love. In the end, the presence of the weeds could make the seed growing stronger. It is the reign of God in God’s kingdom.

Today, the first half of the reading is addressed to the crowds while the second half to the disciples. In the first half, it is about the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast. It shows how God is working in the world through very small things. The second half, which is our main focus today, is addressed to the disciples. We will first think about the hiddenness of the kingdom and why it is so. Next, the cost that was paid for God’s kingdom will be explored. Lastly, the meaning of these parables in our context will be followed.

In the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl, both are about discovery, joy and action. The emphasis on hiddenness which began from the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast continues. The treasure is hidden in the field while the pearl is not initially visible. The merchant is actively looking for pearls, while the other man just stumbles onto treasure in a field. Both, however, recognize the overwhelming value of their discovery and sell everything so that they might buy it. In neither case is there any hint of sacrifice—of giving up something precious—of having to make a difficult decision. Neither is sad to sell everything because they are overwhelmed with the joy of discovery and the prospect of possessing such treasure.

The first thing we may notice is that the buried treasure in a field. It was not uncommon in that time and place for people to bury valuable possessions, because there were no secure banks to safeguard valuables. Small villages could not prevent looting by brigands, and soldiers were free to take what they needed. Burial provided the best security but provided no guarantees. A person might die, taking the secret of the treasure to his or her grave. People might leave home and find themselves unable to return. Jewish Rabbinic law provided that “These finds belong to the finder—if a man finds scattered fruit, scattered money...these belong to the finder.”² As such, for the man who found the treasure in someone else's field, it was necessary to buy the field first – without saying anything to the owner. But is it really the case of the dishonesty of the

¹ Matthew 13:37-38

² William Barclay, 94

man? I don't think so as the parable is about the reign of God and as seen in the mustard seed and the yeast, even though the treasure was there, it was highly likely the owner of the field may not have recognized it as treasure.

We often read about the hiddenness of God's kingdom/ the meaning of the word of God in scripture concerning the reign of God in the world. When God sends Isaiah to prophesy to Israel, God says, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.'³ Also, in Matthew, Jesus thanks the Father, praying, "that you hid these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to infants" (11:25). And he continues to say to them that it is given to them know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but not the crowds. (13:11). That is, unless God reveals it, no one could be able to find, or to understand, or to see, or to enter the kingdom of God. That is, everything is under the absolute sovereign power of God. What about the cost of the kingdom of God, then? How can we pay the price to obtain it?

For the disciples who are listening to Jesus, they left everything to follow Jesus (4:18-22; 19:27-30). Similar to them, we hear that a man who found the treasure in the field and a merchant who found one pearl of great value sell 'all' that they have. The word 'all' (πᾶς/πάντα) is often used to explain what salvation involves. When Paul says, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" in Romans 8:28, ⁴The same 'all'(πάντα) is used in terms of cosmology and soteriology – the doctrine of salvation. While the man who found the treasure in a field can be identified as disciples, the merchant can be Jesus who are searching for the children of God in the world. For the world, they look reckless as they sell 'all' they have to obtain the treasure or the pearl. Yet reading it from a biblical point of view, they sell 'all' things that belong to the world, to buy the treasure/the pearl that belongs to God's kingdom. As Paul says, "... 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, in order that I may gain Christ."⁵ In other words, they no longer regard things valuable that once they used to think precious. In the case of the merchant, 'all' includes his life to buy 'us' for the sake of the Father. It means that neither the man who found treasure nor the merchant is reckless but fully blessed by grace.

So what now? We, as the children of God, did we sell 'all' things when we began to follow Jesus? For many of us, we became the followers of Christ Jesus inadvertently as our parents made us baptized without asking our opinions. In this case, we may belong to the pearl bought by the merchant. As time goes by, we may have gradually learned what it means to sell all things to follow Jesus. One by one, as if the scales fall off from Paul's eyes, we let go off things that have prevented us from being united with Christ Jesus. Now we have new eyes and ears to hear and recognize the hidden treasure and pearls of great value in the world as the co-workers of Jesus. Every day is a new day, and each small thing is mattered in God's kingdom as God is working in and through these small things. May God help us live with joy, love and hope this day and always, and help us find pearls buried in people in the world so theirs will also be used for the kingdom of God. Amen.

³ Isaiah 6:9

⁴ Romans 8:28 Οἶδαμεν δὲ ὅτι τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν τὸν θεὸν πάντα συνεργεῖ εἰς ἀγαθόν, τοῖς κατὰ πρόθεσιν κλητοῖς οὖσιν.

⁵ Philippians 3:8