

Dear Friends,

In the gospel reading this week we hear a number of shortish parables that Jesus told. He uses these short stories to express something of what the kingdom of heaven is like. He uses several brief tales. He tells of a man who finds treasure buried in a field and then sells everything he has in order to buy that field. This is followed by the parable of the pearl of great price. After that Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a net that is let down into the sea. When the net is dragged ashore there are all kinds of fish in the net, the worthless ones are thrown away but the good fish are kept.

I would like us to reflect briefly on the middle one of those three short stories. There are at least two possible ways of interpreting the parable of the pearl of great price. One view regards Jesus as being the merchant and the human race as being the pearl. In this view Jesus pays the ultimate price of life itself in order by his death to purchase the pearl. This view lays great stress on the price that Jesus paid by his death. This interpretation puts great emphasis on the role of Jesus. It was he who spied the pearl, it was he who paid the price, all we can do is accept that. We play the essentially passive part of the pearl.

A rather different light is shed on things if we turn it around, if we instead regard ourselves as the merchant and Jesus as the pearl of great price. In this light what can we learn from this parable? For one thing we should be alert and on the lookout. We should be looking and listening out for Jesus. Our attention is so often bound up in other things that we don't see or hear what God is calling us to do.

This way round the story also brings out the cost of discipleship. There is always a cost. There are those for whom that is a very uncomfortable truth. We can think of the rich young ruler who approached Jesus. He asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus told him he should obey the commandments, which he had done since he was young. The final thing Jesus said was that he should be prepared to give away everything he had. For this young man that made the price just too high, he wasn't prepared to pay that price to obtain the pearl.

That isn't the same for all of us. In that particular case Jesus presumably sensed that wealth and possessions were too high a priority in this young man's life. They were preventing him from responding fully to the call of God. We should all take care that we don't allow other things to come between us and our response to God.

With best wishes,

Mark