

HOMILY SUNDAY 17 - YEAR A (Homily 02)

“Parables that Stretch Us”

(1 Kings 3:5-12; Psalm 119; Romans 8:28-30; Matthew 13:44-52)

What did Jesus preach about the most? What was his favourite topic?

The answer is the Kingdom of God. The readings today invite us to live in the reign, to live in the Kingdom.

The gospel today presents us with three Kingdom parables. A parable was Jesus’ favourite way of revealing the mystery of the Kingdom. C.H. Dodd, in his book *The Parables of the Kingdom*, offers a concise definition of a *parable*. He states that “A parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt of its precise application to tease it into active thought.” Let us allow ourselves to be teased into active thought about the Kingdom of God in our lives.

First and foremost, the three parables in the gospel today invite us to make the Kingdom of God a priority in our lives. The characters in the parables are united in their singlemindedness, their persistence and their dogged determination. Nothing can swerve them from their goal of achieving the end they seek. So must it be with us and the Kingdom of God.

Is the Kingdom a priority for us? We can ask ourselves, “How much time do we spend reading and praying with the Bible? Worshipping in Church with the Christian community? Sitting quietly in prayerful meditation? Serving our community as a volunteer? Sharing our feelings with spouse and family? What are our priorities? Is the Kingdom of God first and above all else?

The first parable describes the Kingdom of God as a treasure. That is a beautiful image, for that is what the Kingdom of God truly is, a treasure to be valued above all other possessions and interests.

The second parable in particular, the Pearl of Great Price, teaches us that the kingdom also involves a healing journey along with making the kingdom a priority.

The pearl is a very interesting analogy for life in the kingdom. Fred Sherrer in his comment on the gospel in an earlier *Living with Christ* captures this idea. “Unlike other precious stones, the pearl originates in a living thing, a speck of foreign matter that has found its way inside the shell. Instead of the stranger being rejected, it is wrapped in ‘swaddling clothes,’ nurtured and in the end, becomes precious beyond our wildest dreams.

This is how our loving God deals with us. God accepts us as we are and knows who we can become. In sending Jesus his Son to us, God forgives us and longs to transform us into the likeness of Christ. In Jesus, God takes our sin and sinfulness, wraps it in forgiveness, compassion and healing and if we are willing, transforms us into pearls of great price.

This process is what our Eastern Rite cousins call *divinization*. This theology holds that we are being transformed, little by little, into God’s likeness. Our faith is dynamic, alive and transformative. That is what St. Paul asserts in the second reading: “For those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son. And those whom God predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Paul is describing this theology of divinization.

Today we would speak of this process in terms of a healing journey. We are all invited to be on a healing journey of faith, love and repentance. One way to assure that this is happening in our lives would be to live thoroughly the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. At Lac St Anne, the largest religious gathering of aboriginal people in North America, we are transforming a sobriety pledge into Step Seven healing prayer, which this year saw about five hundred people celebrate in candlelight. They were making their pilgrimage a deeper transformative faith journey of forgiveness and healing.

The last Parable of the dragnet is a bit more difficult to interpret. If we are living in the kingdom, however, this parable fades into the background. Two comments can clarify this statement.

One is that we need to grow into a more positive view of God as a judge. To judge is to see the value of something. To evaluate is to add value to. God is always trying to get us to see our own beauty, our own self-worth. Many of us struggle with low self-esteem. We seem to think that we are not worthy of God’s love and God’s goodness and find it hard to accept it when it is given to us. God will

probably say to us on judgment day that one of our faults was to fail to accept and appreciate our own God-given goodness.

The other insight into this parable comes from the Palestinian image of a shepherd who walks in front of his flock. The goats naturally follow the lead goat and the sheep naturally follow the lead sheep. The teaching here is that for those who are living in the kingdom, there is no judgment. We have already judged ourselves by the way we are living and loving. That fact will simply be recognized by the Lord on the last day. God will welcome us into the fullness of the life in the kingdom that we have already been living in partially.

The former governor general of Canada, Georges Vanier, had a chapel in his house where he attended daily mass and no matter how tired, always spent a half hour in meditation. In all his dealings with governments and people of all walks of life, he sought to apply the values of the kingdom for the common good. It is no surprise that there are many who think he should be canonized a saint. He truly lived in the Kingdom of God all the days of his life.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is food for our healing journey. It is a share in the heavenly banquet here and now. The wise will long to participate, and to participate fully. We are then missioned, empowered and sent out to live in the Kingdom of God.

So let us put our faith in Jesus, love one another and go on living in the reign, living in the Kingdom of God, in as determined a fashion as the characters in the parables put before us today. May God bless us all in our pursuit of this treasure and pearl of great price.