

17th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Fr Jonathan Jong

1 Kings 3:5-12

Romans 8:28-30

Matthew 13:44-52

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

He is speaking to his disciples now, having left the crowds by the seaside, and who can blame him? It is a draining business, public speaking. Sometimes you just want time alone with friends.

Four parables down, you remember: the sower and the soils, the wheat and the tares, the mustard seed, the yeast.

And then three more now: the treasure in the field, the pearl of great price, the gathering net.

In the cool and quiet of the house, he finally poses the question, “Have you understood all this?”

And they said to him, “Yes”. The liars. And who can blame them? I too would’ve been too stupid, too proud, too embarrassed to have answered otherwise.

To round off this litany of parables, then, a final one, maybe a sort of test, even more puzzling than those preceding, often discounted, even by biblical scholars.

He’s talking to us now, but then I guess he always is. We, you—those of us in this house, this church—(you) are like...a Roman *pater familias*. Or, if you like, a Japanese *Yakuza kumichō*. Or, if you like, a Sicilian Mafia don; but, you know, less criminal. Like them, you have responsibilities, obligations to the family; except that your obligations don’t stop at the *vestibulum*’s edge. You are to raid your storehouse, and cast *out* your treasures into the streets, leaving nothing, neither old nor new. And me too.

New treasures. Like the one in the field, like the pearl, worth all the things we have accumulated, with which we have surrounded ourselves. Those old treasures, the familiar sources of our comfort and security, the objects of our nostalgia. Both are to be given away by

the scribes of the kingdom, the disciples of the Word of God.

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So, it turns out, then, that St Matthew's parables of the kingdom are a sort of commissioning, as I suppose attempts to teach the faith of Jesus always are. All theology is calling.

In a way, none of this is new, none of this is any different from what Jesus always says, what he says to the rich men who come to him on occasion: go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor. Go, cast out your treasures, old and new.

The temptation is always to spiritualise these things, of course. And in a world where the "spiritual" labels just another collection of privatised soothing commodities among others in the marketplace of self-help techniques, it is no wonder that the so-called spiritualising of Jesus's teaching leads so often to moral insipidity. Even St Matthew adds to the beginning of the Beatitudes, to say "blessed are the

poor in spirit”, and we have ever since interpreted that in ways that marginalise the poor even more than we have already.

And so, we talk about spiritual treasures. Of course, the gospel is the new treasure, the pearl; even the seeds, the mustard, the yeast. And of course we are called to proclaim this good news freely, casting it far out of our households, casting it wide on soil and rock and thistle. But the gospel does not consist merely of propositional content, information codified and transmitted in words, cheap and easy to spread, either in tract or tweet, either under the imperial flag or on a trading ship. No, the gospel is a sign of the kingdom: a world changed by Christ, whose Body is the Church, is you and even me. And God knows changing the world ain't cheap: it costs all that we have, all the treasures of our household. *All* is not an ambiguous word, and neither is the moral theology of the New Testament ambiguous, convenient as it is to pretend otherwise.

Nor is it ambiguous who the recipients of our treasures should be: having cast them out, we no longer get to police who picks them up. Rich soil and rocky and

weedy; wheat and tares; fish, *kosher* and *treif*. Thrice, we are shown caution thrown into the wind: efficiency and prudence have nothing to do with it, nothing to do with the gospel. Sowing is done with reckless abandon, and weeding is rejected against all good horticultural sense. The fish are all gathered, and brought to shore. The *sorting* part of things is neither our problem, nor our prerogative. The distinction between the so-called deserving and underserving poor therefore fail abjectly as Christian categories.

To be sure, the efficacy of the sacrifice to which we are called is not entirely irrelevant, but nor is uncertainty about efficacy a valid excuse for inaction that just happens to entail our own enrichment or comfort. It may or may not be a good idea to give cash to panhandlers; Fairtrade certification may or may not improve the lives of farmers; foreign aid by governments may or may not decrease poverty in underdeveloped countries. But if we're not actively trying to discover better ways to feed the poor, heal the sick, and set the captives free, then there's a good chance that our scepticism over current efforts are just a little too convenient, a little too self-serving.

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Here we are, then, called as disciples of the Son of God, crucified and risen, to give everything up and follow him: not metaphorically, but really. Called, most of us, from our places of privilege; yes, even us who feel overworked and underpaid, members of a shrinking middle class, just struggling out there to pay rent or mortgage, struggling to feed our children, to pay for their educations, to prepare for our retirements. These are not simply excuses, but social and material realities that compromise our abilities to live out the gospel that calls us. The discernment between good and evil—or, perhaps more realistically, between goods and goods, evils and evils—is just about beyond us. We are, most of us—I'd wager, even Solomon—simply not adequate to the task set before us. I'm certainly not.

The Christian life is a quixotic enterprise, then: a leaning against the windmills of our natures, as our evolutionary heritage and cultural histories have shaped them. We *will* fail at the task set before us, but that is not the point. The point is to ever pursue the

good to which we are called, even as we are being pursued by the one who calls us, who loves us into being, who justifies us and—would you believe it—*glorifies* us, even in our manifest inadequacies. It is, therefore and in any case, not our job to worry about our inadequacies, any more than about the recipients of our moral obligations; it is not our job to worry about the poverties of our offerings, our paltry grains of yeast and mustard. It is to do the offering itself, to come prepared as much as we can be, to be broken and spilt like so much bread and wine, to be sent out into the world in peace, to love and serve.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**