

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary *Time*      Year A

In the spring of 1947 a Bedouin shepherd called Muhammed the Wolf was shepherding his goats on the Western shore of the Dead Sea. One of the boy's goats had strayed, and to follow it he had to climb a steep cliff. Passing a cave in the rock face, he threw a stone inside; and when he heard the sound of breakage he became frightened and ran back to get his friend. Together they returned and entered the cave. Inside the cave they found several large clay jars; inside the jars, wrapped in a length of linen, was one of the greatest of modern archeological discoveries: the Dead Sea scrolls.

The two young shepherds had stumbled on a marvelous treasure, but they did not realize it. They tried to sell the scrolls in Bethlehem, which is near Jerusalem, but the merchant refused to give them the twenty pounds they were asking for. It wasn't until the scrolls came into the hands of the Syrian patriarch in Jerusalem and three scrolls were smuggled out of the country to the United States that the treasure trove came to light. Among the ancient manuscripts was the rule of the Qumran community and fragments of scripture. A carbon 14 test on the linen wrappings of the scrolls gave them the median date of 33A.D.

33A.D.....At around the same date, some miles north of Qumran, Jesus of Nazareth told a story about a farm worker who stumbles on a great treasure which has been hidden in a field. This man appreciates the value of his find – probably a jar full of money and valuables. He is an astute character: the first thing he does is to bury the treasure again, then he sells everything he owns to buy the field. He experiences the great *joy* of discovery; he knows the *value* of his find; he is prepared to pay the *cost* for possessing it.

Jesus told another parable about a man who discovers a great treasure. Unlike the farm worker, this man does not stumble on his find but discovers it after a long search. He is a wealthy merchant

who has devoted his life to hunting for treasure in the shape of pearls. You see, in Palestine pearls were a byword for what was supremely valuable. Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says: "Do not give dogs what is holy; do not throw your pearls before swine". Pearls were the ultimate valuables.... what is our equivalent today....gold? ...diamonds?... our share portfolio??

"Do not throw your pearls before swine..." The merchant in the story has no intention of decorating the pigsty with pearls; he is collecting the finest he can lay his hands on. He is an expert; he knows precisely what he is looking for. When he comes across the finest pearl he has ever set eyes on, he is in no doubt what to do; immediately he sells everything he owns, so that he can possess the pearl that is without peer. The cost has been everything, but when he owns that pearl his search has ended.

In both parables both men appreciate the true value of what they have discovered and are willing to pay the cost of everything they have for the new treasure. To outsiders looking at them, the two men might appear totally unhinged in risking **everything** on this one venture....worldly wisdom and every financial advisor says "don't put all your eggs in one basket". But both men are certain about what they must do; for them, folly would be in passing over the main chance. In the parables Jesus is asking the crowds if they perceive the kingdom of God in the same way: do they really see it as a treasure that is worth more than everything they now value in life? If the kingdom of God is not perceived as the authentic article, people will not bother renouncing anything to attain it.

Jesus' own perception of life differed sharply from so many people's. He was constantly challenging people to see and see again in order to understand anew. To that purpose his stories turned much of popular wisdom on its head, and this was done in the hope that his listeners might catch something of another way of living in God's world. In effect Jesus had what Solomon prayed for

– a heart to discern the ways of people and the ways of God. But more than this, Jesus had the determination to close the gap between the two ways.

We know that Jesus had to give up everything he valued – his family, his home, his security – to do his Father’s will and preach the kingdom of God. For Jesus there was no treasure greater than his Father’s will: when he uncovered what it was, he renounced everything to make it his own. His own family and neighbours thought his ways either puzzling or foolish; and when he gave up his own life, even his disciples could not understand this ultimate folly. But there was purpose in it: even in death Jesus kept hold of his treasure.

None of us can gain anything of value without renouncing something. Perhaps what we have to renounce first is our perception of what real treasure in this life really is. Few of us will chance on the crock of gold at the end of the rainbow, or win a lottery, or stumble on an oil-field in the backyard. But we **have** all stumbled on treasure. Like the two Bedouin shepherd boys, we may have problems appreciating our find wrapped in the ordinary stuff of life. The real treasure of life is under our noses – in the people we share life with, in the opportunities we face every day to exercise the values of Jesus. None of this might appear a glittering prize, but it is in the heart of the ordinary that we discover the presence of Jesus. He is the authentic article. He is hidden in the common-place, hoping that we’ll stumble on that truth before long.