

**“FOLLOWING THE KING - 37”**

***Matthew 13:44-46***

I'm sure there are several keen shoppers here this morning, so you will probably identify with the feelings that the two men must have experienced in the parables we've just read. They'd seen something they wanted and just couldn't wait to go and get the money to buy it. Today, of course, we have credit cards to, as the slogan for Access used to put it, "*Take the waiting out of wanting*". But there used to be a time when you'd have to go back to the shop to get what you wanted after you'd got the money together – either by saving up or by borrowing it off your parents. I remember my first pair of Levi jeans, which I'd been looking at in Millets for weeks, and finally saving up the £3/17/6 from my paper round money to go and get them.

Here Jesus tells two very short parables to make another point about this Kingdom that he's come to inaugurate, stories about two men who were desperate to get their hands on something, and the lengths to which they went to get the object of their desire. He introduces both of the stories with that little phrase that has become a bit of a refrain in this thirteenth chapter of Matthew's account of his life and teaching: "*The Kingdom of heaven [or the Kingdom of God] is like ...*". Both of the parables are making the same point, but they have different emphases to them. Let's have a quick look at the differences first, then we'll see what the common point is.

Yet again, Jesus is using situations that, if not necessarily totally familiar to his listeners, would at least have been very recognisable. The first concerns a man who most commentators agree was simply a labourer digging in a field. This isn't your Staffordshire Hoard man, out looking for treasure with some kind of sophisticated equipment. In ancient times, people would often bury treasure in the ground as there weren't the same kind of banking facilities we have today. It was considered then to be a fairly safe way of looking after your money or your valuables. Clearly this man was in someone else's field – he has to go and buy it off them – and he wouldn't have been randomly digging there but was almost certainly labouring there. When he comes across the treasure – maybe in a casket or a jar – he realises that if he is going to claim it, he needs to own the land himself. So he carefully re-buries the treasure, scrapes together everything he has and buys the field to make it legally his own. Whatever he paid for the field – and it had cost him all he had – he now owns far, far more than simply the land.

But the emphasis here seems to be on the random nature of his discovery. He stumbles across the treasure – which represents the Kingdom of God – quite by accident whilst going about his day to day business. And there are many people who do stumble upon the Kingdom by accident. As they go about their daily routine, suddenly they are confronted with the reality of the Kingdom of God. Maybe they read something, or see something on television or the Internet. Maybe they are surprised by a seemingly random act of kindness from a follower of Jesus. Maybe you are just the person to be there at just that time, helping to point someone else to the infinite treasure that is the Kingdom of God.

The other man, though, is actually out looking for his treasure. He's a merchant, someone who deals in precious stones and particularly in pearls. Pearls were greatly sought after at this time and people liked them for their beauty just as much as for their worth. The best ones actually came from Britain, so they would have been very costly just in terms of sourcing them. And this man is constantly on the lookout for the very best, the pearl that would just about crown his career as an expert in them. He must have looked at dozens, hundreds each week, but he could never quite find the one he knew was the one outstanding example. And then, one day, he comes across a pearl which is so large, so beautiful, so amazing that he just has to have it and, like the man in the field, he is prepared to give up everything to get hold of it. He sells all that he owns and finally gets his hands on this amazing specimen.

This is not a random discovery. This man has been looking at pearls throughout his working life and he knows what he's looking for but can't quite get his hands on it. And there are many people who are searching for the Kingdom of God. They may not express it quite like that, but they are looking for a philosophy which makes sense, a feeling of satisfaction, a place of fulfilment for them. They've looked

at all kinds of religious ideas, tried all manner of philosophies and worldviews, but never quite found what they're looking for until suddenly they come across the Kingdom of God, they encounter the teachings and the person of Jesus, made real to them through an encounter with a follower of Jesus. And maybe you are just the person to be there to help guide someone to the discovery they've been hoping for for years.

Both men, then, although they are very different, eventually give up everything they own to obtain the treasure they've discovered. Their sacrifice is very costly, but they gain even more, because they not only satisfy their longing, but they gain something of enormous worth. And that moves us towards the common point of these two parables.

The point is not about the sacrifice that the two men make – great though that is. Jesus doesn't begin these parables by saying "*True sacrifice is like ...*" He begins with "*The Kingdom of heaven is like ...*" This isn't about sacrifice, but about the object of that sacrifice. You see, we could read these two little stories as yet another call to sacrifice, another call to total commitment and another bit of teaching that leaves us feeling guilty because we don't really give enough. We could look at the way in which both men gave up absolutely everything – Jesus says they both "*went and sold everything [they] had*" – and worry that we haven't really given up everything we've got (and let's face it, none of us has really done that, have we?). It could be another burden to bear, another religious stick with which to beat ourselves. But that's not the point of what Jesus is saying here. It's not about our sacrifice, it's about the Kingdom of God – it's about the treasure that Jesus sets before us.

Just like the treasure in the field, just like the most valuable pearl, this Kingdom is amazing. It's wonderful, it's infinitely valuable. It's more valuable than anything else you could ever come across. It is worth far, far more than the cost of discipleship. Jesus, as we've said, has been preaching about this Kingdom, but he's also been showing what it could be like. This Kingdom is a world under the sovereign rule of God, where diseases are healed so that all are whole, where relationships are restored so that all experience love, where anxiety is banished as all trust in God, where injustice is unknown so that all enjoy everything equally, where violence is banished so that all know peace. In fact, it's just as God intended this world to be when he first made it, before sin sneaked in and messed it all up. That's the Kingdom, that's wholeness, that's salvation – whatever you want to call it. The comedian Milton Jones expresses it like this – "*Salvation is like being returned to the factory settings.*" Although he adds, "*But you have to admit there is a factory and there could be some settings.*"

We probably don't always appreciate just how wonderful this Kingdom is, how amazing, how valuable. And that may be because we're always focussing on the sacrifices we have to make for it, so we can easily end up by spending all our time mumbling about, "Well, I certainly hope it's going to be worth all this sacrifice, all this stuff I'm doing for Jesus, for the church, for whatever." You see, these two men didn't start grumbling about what they were giving up – Jesus actually talks about the first man selling all he'd got "*in his joy*". Both these men realised just how amazing was the object of their desire and it was worth absolutely anything to get their hands on it.

That's what "*The Kingdom of heaven is like*", says Jesus. It's just awesome. It's just what you've been looking for – even if you couldn't quite put your finger on it. It's the very best. It will fill you with joy. It will outshine anything else you could possibly think of. Don't focus on the sacrifice: focus on the prize. And if you do that, if you look at the benefits, the joy, the wonder of the Kingdom, you'll end up – like these two men – just wanting to give up everything else to get it anyway. And whatever else you give up, however much you give up, however great any sacrifice you might make in response to the discovery of this Kingdom, in the end you will make a net gain, because it is worth far more than anything else you could possibly conceive of. It's difficult to describe it, really – even Jesus doesn't really describe the Kingdom: he just says it's the most wonderful thing you could ever, ever get your hands on, so be prepared to give up anything else you're hanging on to and you'll never regret it. Doesn't that just make you want to worship?

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The first concerns a man who was a labourer digging in a field. When he comes across some treasure he carefully re-buries it, scrapes together everything he has and buys the field to make it legally his own. Whatever he paid for the field – and it had cost him all he had – he now owns far, far more than simply the land. The emphasis is on the random nature of his discovery. Many people stumble upon the Kingdom by accident. As they go about their daily routine, suddenly they are confronted with the reality of the Kingdom of God.

The other man is actually out looking for his treasure. He's a merchant, and is constantly on the lookout for the very best, the pearl that would crown his career. One day, he comes across a pearl which is so amazing that he just has to have it and he sells all that he owns to get his hands on this specimen. And there are many people who are searching for the Kingdom of God. They've looked at all kinds of religious ideas, philosophies and worldviews, suddenly they come across the Kingdom of God.

Both men, then, although they are very different, eventually give up everything they own to obtain the treasure they've discovered. Their sacrifice is very costly, but they gain even more, because they not only satisfy their longing, but they gain something of enormous worth.

But the point is not about the sacrifice that the two men make – great though that is. It's not about our sacrifice, it's about the Kingdom of God – it's about the treasure that Jesus sets before us. Just like the treasure in the field, just like the most valuable pearl, this Kingdom is amazing. We probably don't always appreciate just how wonderful this Kingdom is, how amazing, how valuable. And that may be because we're always focussing on the sacrifices we have to make for it. These two men didn't start grumbling about what they were giving up – Jesus actually talks about the first man selling all he'd got "*in his joy*". Both these men realised just how amazing was the object of their desire and it was worth absolutely anything to get their hands on it.

That's what "*The Kingdom of heaven is like*", says Jesus. It's just awesome. It's just what you've been looking for – even if you couldn't quite put your finger on it. It's the very best. Don't focus on the sacrifice: focus on the prize. And if you do that, if you look at the benefits, the joy, the wonder of the Kingdom, you'll end up – like these two men – just wanting to give up everything else to get it anyway.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Did you stumble across the Kingdom by accident or had you been searching for it for a long time?
2. What would you be prepared to give up for the Kingdom? Is there anything you would not be prepared to give up? Why?
3. What is so wonderful about the Kingdom of God? How would you communicate that to someone who has yet to discover it?
4. Do we really focus enough on the benefits and joys of the Kingdom? Why/why not?
5. How could we encourage each other to make the most of the Kingdom of God?