

Homily 17th Sunday, Year A
St. Monica's Parish: 27 July 2014

I Kings 3:5-12 Solomon's dream: wisdom, not riches and power.
Psalms 119: The Word of God: a lamp unto my feet, a light for my path.
Romans 8:28-30 Those called by God are prepared for their mission.
Matthew 13:44-52 Pearl of great price, buried treasure, wide-casting dragnet: images of God's kingdom, getting our priorities straight.

Sometimes, when I have nothing else to do on a Saturday evening, I switch on the TV and tune in to a PBS program called "Antiques Roadshow". In this show, people bring items culled from their houses, basements and garages to be appraised by professionals, with the hope that this vase or that painting or this piece of jewellery might be in fact a valuable antique. Part of the fun in the program is watching the anticipation rise in the owner as the item given to the expert is appraised. Is that really "buried treasure" in the basement? A pearl of great price in the attic? Or is it just worthless junk, after all?

On the Roadshow, the bottom line is money: how much is it worth? What might it bring at auction? In today's Gospel, Jesus presents us with three parables which remind us that what we should be pursuing is not cold cash, but this elusive reality he refers to as the "kingdom of heaven". In fact, Jesus suggests that our quest for the Kingdom should be as ardent and single-minded as that of a person who discovers buried treasure in a field, a merchant who happens upon a pearl of incalculable value, a fisherman who lets out his dragnet for an abundant catch.

So does this mean we should start running after pots of gold, precious jewels, and quit our jobs to go fishing? Jesus uses these **metaphors** as examples of the different things we tend to value in this world. We all value different things. So think for a moment: what is **your** pearl of great price? What is the hidden treasure for which you would sell all you have, sacrifice everything, in order to possess it? And what is more, that you would do so not reluctantly, dragging your feet, complaining about all you are giving up, but freely, with joyful abandon?

In our complex world, many things compete for the claim to come first in our lives. In his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius mentions three that continue to hold great attraction for our contemporary world, and for many of us as well: **riches, honour, and fame**. Experience and history show us that people will sacrifice their spouses, family, values, even their health – for the sake of their careers, to climb the corporate ladder, for the ultimate prizes promised to those who sacrifice all for the good of the company.

I remember reading an article once about Olympic athletes that reported a shockingly high percentage – over 50% - admitted that they would be willing to use drugs that might take ten years off their life, if it would guarantee that they could win Olympic gold, be the best in the world in their event. The recent “steroid scandals” in pro sports, the legion of failed drug tests at so-called “amateur” competitions, demonstrate that the drive for excellence can lead people to make crazy and wrong choices. Others get inordinately attached to the possession of the latest gadget, the instant-wealth promises of video lotteries and the casino, or the vortex of alcohol, “recreational” drugs, and sexual conquests.

Many of us can and do manage to resist the temptation of choosing riches, honour or fame as the foundation upon which we stake our existence. For some today, the pearl is security: financial, medical, emotional. We want to ensure that we will be taken care of, that the demons of poverty, illness, and loneliness are never experienced or allowed to take hold in our lives. Although security is important, and we need to prepare wisely for retirement and our eventual physical decline, we need to acknowledge that no matter what we do, we can't control every single detail about our future. This became clear to me in following the recent debates over the introduction of euthanasia as an appropriate form of “end-of-life” care in Quebec: so much of it was driven not only by a natural desire to reduce unnecessary pain and suffering, but by the idea that we need to be in absolute control of every aspect of our life – including our death.

In the great literature of the world, and to some degree in popular culture, romantic love is the pearl of great price. Think of the age of chivalry: the valiant knight willing to sacrifice everything, even his very life, for the sake of his lady love. So once you have fallen in love – with a person typically, but it can also happen with a project, a new idea, a cause – everything else goes by the wayside.

But even here, however noble and passionate the feeling, the border between what is genuine love – a willingness to give myself totally for the genuine good of the other – and what is ego-boosting and fuelled by my own neediness can be notoriously difficult to determine.

As Christians, the most important statement we can make about God is that “God is love.” Love, in its deepest and fullest sense, IS the Pearl of Great Price. To move beyond infatuation to a deeper, more fruitful love is to discover our capacity for self-transcendence. True love takes me beyond the satisfaction of my own need to “win” or “possess” someone. True love invites us to the discovery and development of our capacity to give and receive with gratuity and generosity. This is the way God loves us, each moment of each day. God’s love is imaged most powerfully in this world by the protective, self-sacrificial love of parents for children; by the mutual and self-giving love spouses share with one another; in the steady and dependable love at the heart of real friendship.

When we have received this kind of love, when we learn to love in this way, it becomes easier for us to pray as Solomon prays in today’s first reading: asking not for riches or fame or glory or victory over his enemies, but for a wise and discerning heart, capable of guiding and serving others generously and responsibly. We pray in this way when, as St. Paul assures us today, we know that God is in charge: that “all things work together for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose.” We become like that wise householder who draws forth from his or her treasure what is new and what is old, choosing not merely based on its “antiquity” or “novelty”, but according to its *capacity* to help bring forth the Kingdom of God: the true pearl of great price.

The promise is amazing. But it comes at a cost. And that cost is ...everything. That’s what makes it such a tough sell. Being human, it’s so much easier and more natural for us to think that we can do it ourselves, that we can build our own kingdom, our own house, and then give over to God one compartment, one little room. But be warned: once you let God in, God will take over, no matter how much you resist. This is beautifully expressed in a poem by Sr. Margaret Halaska, cited by Fr. Ron Rolheiser in his amazing new book “*Sacred Fire: A Vision for a Deeper Human and Spiritual Maturity*”:

Covenant (Sr. Margaret Halaska)

The Father knocks at my door, seeking a home for his son:

Rent is cheap, I say

I don't want to rent. I want to buy, says God.

I'm not sure I want to sell, but you might come in to look around.

I think I will, says God.

I might let you have a room or two.

I like it, says God. I'll take the two.

You might decide to give me more some day.

I can wait, says God.

I'd like to give you more, but it's difficult. I need some space for me.

I know, says God, but I'll wait. I like what I see.

Maybe I can let you have another room. I really don't need that much.

Thanks, says God, I'll take it. I like what I see.

I'd like to give you the whole house but I'm not sure –

Think about it, says God. I wouldn't put you out.

Your house would be mine and my Son would live in it.

You'd have more space than you'd ever had before.

I don't understand at all.

I know, says God, but I can't tell you about that.

You'll have to discover it for yourself.

That can only happen if you let us have the whole house.

A bit risky, I say.

Yes, says God, but try me.

I'm not sure – I'll let you know.

I can wait, says God. I like what I see.

So as the long days of summer unfold before us, let us take some time to reflect on and, if necessary, re-order our priorities: our "pearl of great price, our hidden treasure: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be." May we ask, like King Solomon, for wisdom and discernment; may we grow in trust, like St. Paul, that when we make God's love the foundation of our lives, all works together for good; may we open our hearts, our homes, and our entire lives to Christ: who asks for everything, and gives us back infinitely more. Amen.