

17TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR – 2005
“A pearl of great price...”

We've got to start with Solomon. God says to him, in effect, *“I give you one wish. Whatever you ask, I will give you. You name it, and it's yours.”* Put yourself in the place of Solomon. What would you ask for; to win the Lotto, to have a long life, a happy family? How about an end to terrorism followed by world peace? Of all the things Solomon could have had, he asks for *“an understanding heart with which to judge people and to know right from wrong.”* As the successor of King David, he asks to be a good king. He asks God to help him be what God has asked him to be in the first place. His focus was not selfish. He did not ask to be relieved of his responsibilities, but to meet them with an understanding and wise heart. And because God grants his desire, the Wisdom of Solomon becomes legendary.

Now let's go to the gospel. The first reading about Solomon's wish should help prepare us to understand these brief parables. The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field. You're walking along and stumble upon it by accident. You see its value and so you hide it so no one else will stumble over it and take it, and then you go and sell everything you have to buy the field. Nothing is more important than that discovered treasure.

Now, if the kingdom of God is like that, does this mean that the kingdom of God can be found in the ordinary events of life, like when we are just walking in a field? What could be more ordinary? To encounter the kingdom, we needn't go to national cathedrals or magnificent basilicas or even places of pilgrimage like Lourdes, as wonderful and as inspiring as they are. The kingdom of God may be right under our nose. It is that moment when God touches our lives, and everything seems different.

Bob Simon, a CBS reporter, was captured by the Iraqi army in the first gulf war. Released ten days later, he said that that experience changed his life. He had always wanted to be the first on the scene to scoop a big story. That was the most important thing in his life, that is, until after his capture. Then he discovered it was his wife and family. He would give up everything to have them back again. He wasn't looking for this awareness, but he found it by the frightening turn of events in his life. It was hidden in plain view.

Sometimes we are looking for something that will give real meaning to our lives, but we don't know what it is. We trust there is more to life than what we are experiencing. So we look at what the world has to offer. Some try making money, others seek power, some try to be famous; others dabble in pornography, sex and drugs. If living with this person doesn't do it, they find someone else. But the longing for more continues. Last week I read a book about Tony Hendra who abandoned his Catholic Faith for the world of wealth and celebrity. As his successful career and second marriage faltered, he entertained thoughts of suicide. Then he remembered a Benedictine monk, Father Joe, whom he had known as a boy and kept in touch with over the years. He went to him as a last resort. In short, through Fr. Joe, he discovered his "pearl of great price." God touched him, and he rediscovered his Catholic roots. And in finding that pearl, he changed his life and it saved his marriage. *Father Joe* is the inspiration and the title of his book. Notice, it wasn't enough for him just to recognize the pearl of great price. He had to "sell all," he had to change his life, to have it.

The final parable about the kingdom of heaven being like a catch of fish calls for discernment. We have to be careful about what we sell everything for. Actually, we cannot buy the kingdom of God. We can only

surrender ourselves to it. Rather than sell all we have to acquire the kingdom, we need to give ourselves to it.

What is the treasure in the field, the pearl of great price? Over the years, I've come to some awareness of what it is for me. It's what gives my life meaning. It's what gives me joy. I'm not talking chocolate here, although chocolate is a gift from God. What is it that I am willing to surrender my life to? To God, yes, but not just to any kind of God. I can surrender my heart only to the kind of God revealed to me in Jesus. He is a God who shows us the way of love not hate; forgiveness not revenge, justice not oppression. He reveals a God who serves us and then asks us to serve with him. He is a God who tells us to give a glass of water to a child, and not to forget the prisoner behind bars. He is a God who respects all people, from the unborn innocents to the condemned criminal. He is a God who says, "*Father forgive them,*" rather than "*Father, destroy them.*" Jesus is a God who selflessly gave his life for us so we could live. While he was a victim, he never played to role of a victim. And he never created a victim. And then he says, "*Come, follow me.*"

If I thought that becoming a monsignor would make me more Christ-like, I'd say, "*Make me a monsignor.*" But it wouldn't. I fear it might separate me further from the people with whom I am called to be one. If I thought being more clerical would make me more approachable, I would wear the cassock again, but I fear it will simply distance me from you. If I thought being a Christ-like priest meant I was somehow above you or better than you, I'd struggle with images of Jesus on his knees washing the apostles' feet as an example of how I was to live as a priest. While power and prestige are tempting, the image of Jesus calls me to resist them. It is a struggle. My battle is against God more than Satan. I pray to lose it.

You see, whenever we surrender ourselves to anyone or anything - and we will, one way or the other - the test is whether or not it will demand the very best of who we are as human beings? Will it make us better men, better women, better human beings, better disciples of Jesus? If it doesn't, it should be thrown out. If it does, we have found the pearl of great price!

May the Eucharist we celebrate continue the transformation of our hearts.