

Matthew 13: 45-6. The parable of the Pearl of Great Price

What do they teach ministers? In my most grumpy moments I sometimes ask myself "What do they teach ministers nowadays?"; but this morning's question is not grumpy but neutral. What do they teach ministers? Let's drop in on a preaching class?

The professor begins: This morning we are thinking about a sermon based on one of the parables of Jesus. Let me remind you of it. It is in St Matthew chapter 13 verses 45 & 46 *Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.* As usual three of the class have been working on it and will tell us this morning how they would preach about it. Angela, you go first.

Thank you professor. I think I would begin by saying that it is surprising to find Jesus telling a story about a precious pearl. It's not likely that he would have seen many; and it's not likely that his audience would either. We are much more used to Jesus telling stories about plants or fish or sheep. Then I would try to get the congregation to picture the merchant searching. The text is quite clear: it says that he was in search of fine pearls

I meet so many people who are searching for something. The meaning of life. The meaning of their own life. The reality of God. The love of God. Answers to prayer. I meet so many people who are searching. Searching through the ups and downs of their own lives, searching through the tears of the world. This parable of Jesus is good news for them. Jesus makes it clear that the kingdom of God involves searching. It doesn't make you a bad person to be searching. It doesn't mean you have been left behind.

There is a Chinese proverb I would tell them which fits a story about searching for pearls. *Pearls lie not on the seashore. If thou desirest one thou must dive for it.* The church seems to give the impression that good people know all the answers about God because they really believe: and people who are doing their best to find faith but find it hard are sometimes made to think they are second-class Christians. Jesus story is good news for them.

And the professor replies: Good stuff, Angela. I like the Chinese proverb and it does fit. I also like your theme of searching. You are quite right: people who are struggling for faith – the searchers – feel inadequate in church and among church people. Yet they are exactly the sort of people who came to hear Jesus and who heard him speak good news to them. However, there is a problem with your sermon. You began by telling us that it was a story about a pearl – and then you did not mention the pearl again. Your sermon would have been the same whether or not the merchant ever found the pearl. Do you think that it does not matter in the story as Jesus told it whether or not the pearl was ever found?

Now, whose sermon is next? William: it's your turn.

OK, professor. Angela is always very good about thinking about the people in the congregation listening to the sermon and what they might get out of it: so it is typical of her that she wanted to preach a sermon that would help people who are struggling to find faith. But I agree with you point, professor. Angela did not put her finger on the real meaning of the story Jesus told. The centre of the story is the merchant finding the pearl. That is what Jesus wants us to concentrate on.

So my sermon would be about finding. I might begin the sermon by asking the congregation to think of times when they have lost and found something precious. I will remind them of other stories that Jesus told about finding. Like the one about the lost sheep and the joy of the shepherd when he finds the sheep. And the story about the prodigal son and the father's joy when the lost son returns.

What is it that the merchant has found? He has found a pearl of great value. People might be interested to know that a pearl which Richard Burton bought for Elizabeth Taylor was sold in 2011 for £8 million. The merchant wanted it not only because it was valuable but because it was beautiful. Christianity far too often seems dull and tasteless and tired. Jesus tells a story which suggests that life in God's kingdom is like something shining and gorgeous and very, very beautiful. My sermon would bring people to thinking about God and beauty. And I would finish by quoting Psalm 27: *One thing I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord*

And the professor replies. Thank you, William. Thank you especially for a sermon about beauty. I agree with you that sermons are often far too grim. I also very much welcome the way you use other stories Jesus told to illustrate this one. Except that the other stories you mentioned are not the same. In the “lost and found” parables – the lost coin, the lost sheep, the lost son – the point of the story is the joy of the finder. You could think some more about the absence of that in this story. Jesus does not say that the merchant was overjoyed. Why not?

And now let us hear Fred’s sermon.

My sermon is about the last part of the parable, professor. The part where it says *on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.* My sermon is about sacrifice. What Jesus says is not just that the merchant bought the pearl once he had found it, but that he sold all that he had to buy it. He gave up all that he had. He made an enormous sacrifice for the pearl of great price.

I want to tell a congregation that we have our Christianity too easy these days. We invite people to be friends of Jesus. We used to invite people to be followers of Jesus, but nowadays that is seen as too demanding. Jesus himself spoke to his disciples about taking up their crosses. You don’t hear that kind of language very much nowadays.

In one of our other classes the theology professor has been making us read a book I would quote in my sermon. It is by the German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and its title is worth remembering. It is called “the Cost of Discipleship”. The first sentence is the one I would quote. “Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our church. We are fighting today for costly grace.” The whole point of my sermon would be to use this text about the pearl to confront people with the cost of discipleship.

Thank you, Fred. This could be a rousing sermon. I’m pleased that you are taking your studies in other parts of the course into your peaching work. You might want to think a bit more about Jesus himself, and that great text from Second Corinthians which changed life for St Francis *For you know the generous act of*

*our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.*

So thank you Angela, William and Fred. The class has had an opportunity to hear three promising sermons from you; and I am sure you have all been thinking of how to write your own sermon – maybe using some of the ideas of these three.

But when you do write your own sermon you should mark not only where Angela and William and Fred did well; but also where they fell short. They all fell short in the same two ways. First of all they did not say anything about the first words of the parable, *the kingdom of heaven is like*. If the preacher says nothing about these words, modern sermon-hearers are going to assume that the story is about heaven. But you know that is not what is meant. Jesus is giving a picture of life, here and now, lived under the rule, the kingship of God. Life with God. It is not merely a story of some future life.

Secondly, each student was so busy dealing with one part of the parable of Jesus that they did not quite manage to reflect the full meaning of the story. Angela was very good on searching, but had nothing about sacrifice; William was very good about beauty, but again was silent about sacrifice. Fred's whole sermon was about sacrifice, but he did not catch for us the great good that was worth sacrificing for.

Somehow, we want to reflect the whole story Jesus told. So let me read it to you again, class, while you think of the full movement of this very short parable from beginning to end. And as you go back to your desks to write your own sermon on the whole thing, I will help you by suggesting a title for it.

*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.*

You might call it "Life with God: extraordinary prize, extraordinary price"