

**Sermon for 30th July 2017
Matthew 13. 31-43**

The Kingdom of Heaven is Like Treasure

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INTRO: Trellech

In 2002, a 22-year old archaeology graduate called Stuart Wilson was earning a small living working as a toll-collector at a road-bridge. He could have started buying a house. Instead, he spent £32,000 on a field half way between Monmouth and Chepstow instead.

He believed that under that field lay the lost Welsh city of Trellech. In the 13th century about 10,000 people lived there; at the time, maybe 40,000 did in London – so, for medieval Britain, Trellech was a serious town. But no-one knew where it was.

Except Stuart, so he thought. And a lot of people, including many historians and archaeologists, laughed at him.

Well, we're missing out right now: yesterday and today are the annual open days at the Lost City of Trellech site, in Stuart's field, where they have now found at least eight dwellings, including a large manor house, a lot of artefacts, and evidence of human settlement there going back 8,000 years or more. No one is laughing at Stuart Wilson now.

1. Choices

Jesus said,

'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.'

It was quite common, apparently to find treasure in the ground in Jesus' time: it was often where people buried their valuables, or the spoils of war, planning to come back for it later.

Jesus tells a one-liner story about someone who found such a cache, so quickly hid it again, then went and sold all he had to raise £32,000 to buy the field, -or whatever it cost, so that he could claim the treasure he knew was there. Stuart Wilson would like the story, I think.

And Jesus also said,

'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.'

Again, there is a choice going on here between things of value; all pearls are good, but this was THE finest pearl the merchant ever saw; other pearls paled into insignificance beside it. He sank all he had into getting the best.

Jesus was clearly saying something about there being a real choice to be made in relation to matters of faith.

Jesus did not talk about people being Christians; that word had not been invented. He talked about the rule of God, or kingdom of God. He was posing the question: what would it be like if things were done

God's way, if God were running the show around here, instead of the current crews? (Now, there's a thought: would God have Scaramucci as a press officer?¹ I think not).

He asked what the rule of God would look like and what the signs of that shift would be?

And he uses the image of a small seed being planted, and growing into a huge tree: it is about the growth of something good and beautiful, from a seed of faith. This is what happens when people seek the kingdom of God, with the faith they have: good things will grow, says Jesus.

He used the picture of yeast: bread without it is flat; a little yeast worked through the dough makes a huge difference. So people of faith, seeking the kingdom, he said, can have a huge impact on the world.

And he talked about treasure and pearls, and the real choice we are faced with about whether to invest ourselves in the kingdom that God is bringing, or not.

2. The Choice is Real

Now, some might respond,

"But it doesn't matter what I do: everything is going to be OK anyway, Rick. Weren't you listening to the reading from Romans 8? After that list of all the terrors life and death could ever throw at us, Paul said he was convinced nothing could separate us from the love of God. So my choices don't matter – God's got my back whatever."

¹ Scaramucci was then sacked two days after this sermon was preached!

Well, I actually don't think it works like that.

First, I don't think that makes any real sense of what is really being said in Romans 8. Paul is not writing to all humanity, whatever their circumstances, and saying, "Hey everybody, everything's going to be alright in the end. So, relax."

No, he is writing to a small group of people who *have* already sold every pearl they had to buy the one of great price: these are people who have made the choice to follow Christ, even though that was often costly, living as they did in the capital of an empire that worshipped its Emperors and other gods, and frequently persecuted traitors who revered a Galilean prophet instead.

Paul is talking to people who have made this bold choice, and saying,

"You bought the right field! Because God has already given everything for us in Christ, he will now give us everything else too. We may fear the sword, we may fear death. But we are walking with the one who can bring us through life and death itself safe, held. Having made Jesus our Lord, nothing can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Now, there are big questions here about the response we make to God's love. Does that matter?

My answer to the question, is: yes, it does.

Am I therefore saying that only those who are Christians will be saved eternally beyond death? No – that's not something I know the answer to. There are huge questions here – and they are not easy to solve, whatever view one takes.

But, no, I am not trying to lay down any ruling about that. But I am still sure that our response to God's invitation of love in Jesus matters.

Otherwise, what is Jesus *talking* about here?! The parables are meaningless if our response is unimportant. We'd have to re-write them:

"There was once a merchant who collected pearls, and he saw the finest one ever. But, hey: so what? He had other pearls. All pearls are good, right?"

That's not what he said.

And the assurance Paul offers – this huge, bold "*nothing*": nothing in all creation can take us out of the safe and loving hands of God – this only works psychologically for people who make some response of faith. It may feel very open-minded for Christians to say God loves everyone, whatever they believe – and he does – but the actual comfort a person might find in believing God never forsakes us, even through the worst of times, and even through death itself, that comfort comes to those who in some way come to share the belief, who make some response of faith to God, even if faith is small, and sometimes weak.

However open and generous my theology is, holding that God may find a way to welcome everyone eternally, that is no comfort now to the person who has never heard about Christ in a way they have found compelling or someone who has decided they do not believe: right now, they face the terrors of life and of death without a trust that they can grasp the hand that will never let them go.

So, yes, our response to God matters, and you'll find no part of the New Testament which lays out the good news of Jesus and then says, "But – hey! –it doesn't matter what anyone thinks about this. It's all just fine anyway." No, the logic always, always runs quite differently: "If this is who God is and how he has loved us, have faith, and make this the solid rock on which you build your life, and the gauge by which you measure what is really of value. Love God and love others, because you have been loved."

The message is always that our response matters:

Buy that field.

Invest in that pearl, and if you need to sell some other clutter to do that – then do it.

And this places some responsibility on those of us who think we know at least something about this treasure: does our life as a church, who we are and what we do, make it *look like* treasure, worth risking your shirt – or at least your pearls – to get?

3. Alt.parables

That is, we need to help people respond to God, for our response to God matters – for our sake. For the parables could also be written like this:

Jesus might have said:

Missing the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant who saw the finest pearl ever, and was amazed by it, entranced, but decided that if he had to sell his collection to get it, well - he didn't want to. And yet,

ever after he thought of that pearl; and, ever after, his smaller, less beautiful pearls, never really pleased him again.

Or it's like a man who found treasure in a field, but knew it would be a lot of hassle to sell enough of his possessions to buy that field, so he let it pass. He always wondered what he'd missed, and he never knew. Oh, well ...

Or it's like Stuart Wilson, who was sure an amazing lost city could be found if he purchased a certain field, but he decided instead to put down a deposit on a two-bedroomed flat in Chepstow and keep working in road toll-booth. He did always wonder what he might have found, though.

Jesus says, "The Kingdom of heaven is like someone in Brancepeth who knew there really was more to God than they had yet discovered, so they ..."

Well, you finish it: what did you do?

*Our father, in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come. Amen.*