

2. What's it worth?

Matthew 13:44 - 46

Psalms 19:7 - 10

To the casual observer these are actions that simply do not make sense. Why would someone whose life has been to discover, collect and trade in fine pearls suddenly dispose of their entire stock? No doubt this man would have gained a wealth of expertise in his field; pearls were his life – why suddenly get rid of them, and why do so of his own free will? And why would anyone be prepared to sell everything they had, just to buy a field? Why this particular field - surely there were plenty of others to choose from? And from the way the story is told, we might well assume that the land in question was not even up for sale at the time, so our prospective purchaser probably had to make an offer that was well over the odds to tempt the present owner into parting with it.

But in the story, Jesus shares some key inside information. The pearl merchant may end up losing his significant collection, but in doing so becomes the owner of a specimen whose size and beauty eclipses anything that he might have given up. And of course our field owner knows that once he has taken possession of it, he will become entitled to a hoard whose value is significantly greater than anything it may have cost him to acquire. Each proves the worth of what no-one else can see, by the commitment they show to their goal.

These are not acts of reckless impropriety or overwhelming, impulsive generosity, they are simply human nature at work. Through quite different means, each is able to see the whole picture, and in doing so, considers the price that they will have to pay as insignificant. For the Pearl seller, it is a perspective gained through a lifetime of acquired knowledge enabling him to recognise a good thing when he sees it. Like an antique expert who comes across a piece of priceless china at a car boot sale, his awareness of the market gives him the insight to know that this is something worth getting hold of, whatever the short-term cost.

The field owner's experience is quite different. He seems to have stumbled across his find more through good fortune than any careful study. It was probably the last thing he was looking for at the time, but he knew the value of what he had uncovered, and that if the field was his, anything found within it was his too. This goal was worth pursuing at any cost.

In telling these stories, Jesus is not arguing that Christians should throw themselves into a life of abject poverty (though he does have some serious things to say about wealth elsewhere), nor is he calling us to pour our money into every cause that comes our way. In fact he shows us that at the heart of being a *cheerful giver* is not parting with that which we do not want to, or being driven by a sense of duty to do one thing with our money when deep down we'd rather be using it for something else. Imagine how these two characters must have felt at that crucial moment when they handed over their hard-earned cash. It was probably done with a real sense of excitement and anticipation, even impatience as their longed-for goal finally came within their reach.

This happened, not because they had cultivated a particular attitude to their money, but because they recognised the true worth of what they were doing. And as he outlined this most natural of human stories, Jesus pressed home a vitally important point, the value of God's Kingdom and our place within it need to be understood as things that are equally valuable.

In the film "Waterworld", we are presented with a futuristic world where the Oceans have taken over the Earth's surface and the few human communities that are left, live at the edge of survival on precarious floating islands. The most valuable and precious commodity that anyone can have is ordinary garden soil, a few handfuls of which can be exchanged for immense wealth. This is a world which has been turned upside down, as human beings recognise that without soil, they have nothing. Gold and jewels may be attractive to the eye, but they have little use when food and the space to grow it have become so scarce.

Perhaps if the characters in Waterworld had had the foresight to store up a few sackfuls of earth in the days before the land was invaded by the sea, they would have the means of great wealth in the new world that then emerged. In many respects, Jesus invites us to have

similar foresight in Parables like these. We too have become citizens of a new world order; the Kingdom of God. We are called to live out our commitment to that Kingdom in the here and now, but He challenges us to recognise and embrace its values as we do. These stories are a reminder of the true worth of His Gospel, its message and calling, and invite us to re-align our lives around that reality. Through them Jesus suggests that if we have truly understood the nature of His Kingdom, then our natural and instinctive response will be like the main characters in these stories – we will stop at nothing to gain our place within it; we will consider any sacrifice worthwhile to be part of it.

These are not stories about what we do with our money or how much or how little we give, rather they ask whether or not we have grasped and continue to grasp what a precious thing it is to be included in God's Kingdom. They invite us to examine our priorities and lifestyle and to seriously ask ourselves whether we live in a way which reflects the fact that our identity in Christ is the most precious and costly thing that we could ever have. In our relationships with others, they ask whether we have truly embraced the fact that the most precious thing that we can offer them is to share in that Gospel promise.

Whether, like the pearl-merchant our commitment to Christ has come as a result of careful study and reflection, or like the field-owner we have stumbled across this precious gift in a quite unexpected way, the question is still the same – are we allowing ourselves to see the whole picture? We noted at the beginning, that anyone who was not aware of all of the facts would struggle to make sense of what these two men were doing – perhaps then if we struggle to muster the same enthusiasm in our service of God's Kingdom, we have somehow lost sight of the "treasure within". Or maybe we have learned these things in our heads, but have never really allowed it to affect the way we organise and share our everyday lives, including our attitude to our money and possessions.

This is the realisation that is declared through the words of Psalm 46, describing God's word as something that is more precious than gold and sweeter than honey. These might not be the images that we would use today, but they represent what most people would strive for in probably every generation of human history. Gold is the ultimate wealth – honey is the ultimate pleasure. To this day, these two things summarise what for most people, particularly in our Western world, would be their key hopes and dreams. We seek celebrity status, business success, fortune and power in order that we might be wealthy and fulfilled.

But the Psalmist has made a far more profound discovery; the ways of God are of greater worth. And this is no mere sentimentalism; it is a stark reality in the history of God's people. As a nation they experienced times of slavery, famine, invasion and exile, as well as times of great prosperity and peace. Personal gain and pleasure counted for very little in those times when the nation suffered through the failure of their harvest or their inability to withstand military threat. And God's Word was clear, their well-being and prosperity depended on one thing and one thing alone; their commitment and obedience to God. God's Word was quite literally more precious than gold and sweeter than honey; for when it was given its rightful place and embraced in the life of the nation, it meant prosperity and well-being for all.

Two questions emerge from stories like these to challenge us again and again: "Have we recognised the true worth of God's Kingdom?" "Is that worth reflected in every aspect of the way we live our lives – not least the way we use our money and possessions?"

Some Questions to consider:

How do you respond to the two final questions in this reflection?

How does your attitude towards giving reflect those of the pearl-merchant and field-buyer? What is God saying to you in the light of your response?

What are the things that you would sell everything to own or achieve? To what degree are they the things of God's Kingdom?

How might you think or act differently in response to these reflections?