

Seventeenth Sunday of the Year July 30, 2017

1 Kings 3:5,7-12 Romans 8:28-30 Matthew 13:44-52

Today's Readings stress on the importance of the Kingdom of God and demand a personal response on the part of every Christian to God and to his Kingdom. In normal language the Kingdom of God is understood as God's rule in the heart of every individual. In the New Testament there are almost one hundred and fifty references to the Kingdom and the more Jesus speaks about it, the more he reveals its mystery. The Kingdom constantly invites people to the high ideals and great generosity. It also calls for a great measure of tolerance, patience and understanding in seeing the Kingdom become a reality. The Kingdom is primarily an environment, it is a set of relationships, and it is a situation where God's values prevail. The divine values in practice are nothing but the deepest human values and aspirations as mirrored in the life of Jesus, who is himself the revelation of God to us in accessible human form. While today's Gospel presents us with the image of the kingdom, its focus is not the hidden treasure, pearls or the catch of fish. It is the actions of the people in the parables. They are relentless in their search for the prize. They are persistent in the face of challenges and they become innovative in looking for ways to overcome the obstacles they face. It is with joy and assurance that one sells everything else to obtain them. In the first reading we have the king making a right choice before God. He asks for a listening heart that is to have the wisdom to serve God's people with Justice. God grants him his request and more qualities to indicate their divine origin. In the second reading Paul tells us that God fashions all events in our lives for our good and for our salvation. Christ is the firstborn who is God's gift to us and God intends that as his brothers and sisters, we must be conformed to Christ's image. He wishes that all make use of the gifts granted to them and utilize the necessary means to attain eternal glory.

In the First Reading from the First Book of Kings, we heard how the Lord God rewarded Solomon for his unselfish desire to be righteous before the people as their King. King Solomon, when given the opportunity to ask for what he wishes, prays for practical wisdom and prudence to discern for his people right from wrong. Kingship in Israel was established by God to serve the people. Since God was the true king of Israel, David and his successors were to use their position to steer the people on right path of faith. David was partially successful in this role and his successors were not. His son Solomon had made alliance with Egypt had built his palace before he sought to build a Temple for God and the sacrifices were offered in high places. The Jewish traditions credited Solomon with wisdom which surpassed any other king of Israel and it is credited to the humility he exhibited before God. When God comes to him in a dream, offering to grant him any request, Solomon displays extraordinary wisdom. He identifies himself as God's servant ruling over God's people and he asks for an understanding of heart to govern the people justly. He did not ask just to have things, or to have obstacles in his life removed. He asked to be able to see. In other words, he asked for wisdom and discernment. God is pleased that Solomon ranked service to God over the standard interests of Monarchy: long life, wealth and power together with control over enemies. Solomon's request was granted. God further declares that Solomon will be unique among all the kings of the earth. God says: "I give you a heart wise as none before you have had and none will have after you."

In the Second Reading from the Letter to the Romans Paul says that all things work for good for those who love God. God's plan is that we be conformed to the image of his son Jesus and that Christians reproduce in themselves an image of his Son by progressively sharing more and more in the risen life of Christ. Paul here wants Christians to realize that they have been destined from all eternity to be confirmed to the image of his son. Further he says that God knew before creation which one among us would respond to His grace through our own free will. In deciding to create the universe, we know that God arranged everything out of love. He knew beforehand about those who would live our Christian faith in accordance with the teachings of Jesus, shining in Divine love so we may inherit the Kingdom of God. God is active in all events of their lives. We are in God's mind from the beginning and God will complete his plan when we are glorified. If we are among the humble and obedient servants of God, those that He foreknew, then we are among those who have been called to be justified. We are among those who will be glorified in Jesus Christ. In speaking of the final destiny of glory for all those who place their faith in Jesus Paul says that we are predestined to be saved in him who has lovingly called us to be his own sons and daughters. Paul declares that, for the person who loves God, everything can be turned to good.

In the Gospel of today we are presented with three parables, two of which are closely linked in meaning but with slight difference. The first two parables using the images of hidden treasure and a pearl of great price are addressed to individuals who with joy and assurance sell everything else to possess something precious. The third parable speaks of the realistic situation, similar to one about the wheat and the darnel, about the Christian sense of time and the separation process at the end of time. Here perhaps the church quietly explains the existence of people both good and bad. The first and second parables are in effect saying that to know God and to live according to the Gospel are the most precious things in life. Through Jesus and the Gospel we come to know and understand what the real meaning of life is and what the most important things in life are. The comparison here is based on obtaining something of extremely high value. The dynamic described is that nothing will get in the way of obtaining an object of extremely high value if one desiring it feels it must be acquired at any cost. Both the parables demand renunciation, risk and commitment. The emphasis is not so much on the pain of renunciation as on the supreme value of the reward they will obtain. Jesus advocates the total reversal of the past in order to gain a wonderful future.

What many do not realize is that the treasure buried in the field legally belongs to the owner of the field and therefore the person who finds it sells everything and purchases the land in order to become its owner. In this parable the finder does not tell the owner of his discovery but purchases the land to make it legal. Jesus does not pass judgment on his ethics but stresses on his life time discovery of the reign of God. We must remember that in early days the ordinary persons could not avail the facilities of Banks and burying the valuable things in the ground was a possible alternative. There was the danger of foreign invasion or brigandage that made rich people or royal households to bury their gold or precious treasures in the ground. Of course, because of war or some other unforeseen calamity, they might have to leave the place suddenly and not be able to take their belongings with them. They might not be able to return or they might die before they could do so. Someone else, then, might stumble on their

treasure and find ways and means to take possession of it. In this parable, the man comes across the treasure and is aware that it does not belong to him. He sells everything he has in order to get ownership of the field and hence of the buried treasure.

Thus the parable tells us of a person who actually goes beyond all ordinary possibilities to obtain an object of great value. This shows how valuable and precious the kingdom of heaven is. The idea obviously is that when one really discovers Jesus and his vision of life everything else becomes secondary. In the service of the Kingdom there are no half measures and in that service there is a special kind of liberating joy. The second parable is similar. A businessman looks for fine pearls. When he finds the one he wants, he sells everything else he has in order to acquire this precious pearl. A slight, if significant, difference has been pointed out between the two stories. For, in the first, the man was not actually looking for the treasure. Perhaps he found it while digging the ground or ploughing the field, that is, in the course of his ordinary working day. Whereas the treasure was found accidentally, the pearl in the second parable was found after a diligent search. The man was on the lookout for the "pearl of great price". He knows it must exist somewhere and he uses all his energies to find it. In the ancient world pearls were special not only for their intrinsic value but also for their beauty. Once he discovers this pearl, he does not hesitate to use the necessary means to acquire it. This was Paul's experience as he tells the Philippian community: "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ" and again "For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain".

This brings us to the third parable today of the net thrown into the sea and this story focuses on the ultimate judgment. To understand the church better and the way it exists, Jesus gives us the parable of the net. Here Jesus compares the church to a fishing net which when thrown into the lake collect all sorts of fish. The net could not and does not discriminate. It was left to the fishermen to do the dividing and the separating process. While the first and second parables speak of the total commitment and dedication which are the ideal of every follower of Christ, this third parable helps to put our two feet firmly back on the ground. It reflects the same emphasis that the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the weeds made. Again, the good will be separated from the bad and reward and punishment will be administered accordingly. This time it is the angels who will make the judgment. While the ideals are valid and still beckon us, they must not lead us into any form of elitism. The point is that in the kingdom of heaven there will be accountability. This parable reminds us that the Church and even the Kingdom in the process of its evolution is full of all kinds of people. Our Church is a Church of saints and sinners, the good and the bad. Those who have heard the teachings of Jesus and put them into practice will enter the kingdom of heaven and those who do not will be excluded. The judgment is not arbitrary and rests ultimately on the response of the one who has heard the message of Jesus. The Church too has its role to play namely to accept into its bosom the poor, the crippled, the blind, lame and all those in need and lead them to the treasure and the pearl of great price. In the meantime, it is for us to learn to be tolerant, compassionate and understanding those who seem to fall far below the requirements of the Gospel and the Kingdom.

The disciples declare that they have understood what Jesus has taught them in and through these parables. Jesus responds with a saying that describes the calling and task of everyone who desires to be a follower of Jesus in the Kingdom of heaven. It is a matter of drawing on the rich treasury of the past, but shaping it to apply for guidance into the future. Jesus tells them that they will be like scribes or men of learning who will have ancient and modern teaching with them to give to the hearers. The past tradition is not to be done away with, but we can never return there to live. The future requires the past for a firm foundation without which it will never be realized. This balancing act is the task of each one of us who have been instructed in the kingdom of heaven. Judgment is for later. Right now, it is for us to use the time given to us to go in search of the treasure and the pearl of great price, of the gift to be able to identify, with Jesus, the really true, the good and the beautiful, and to help others too in the same search. Thus when we approach the Eucharistic table and celebrate this sacrificial meal, we express our faith in Jesus who is our pearl of great price. Jesus is worth everything to us and allowing ourselves to be united to him in communion is the greatest gift we can give ourselves.

As reflect on this word of God, Jesus invites us to build the kingdom searching relentlessly and seeking his presence. The reward will be something precious and which cannot be lost at any time. We are called to face obstacles and we are called to be innovative in the ways in which we overcome those challenges. King Solomon responded to God asking for wisdom and knowledge and he was given the precious reward. The persons in the parable went in search of the treasure and the pearl and took the risk to obtain it for them. The parable of the net will tell us of the need for discernment on the kingdom to be good and be able to see the preciousness of our choice. This gives us the joy of discovering the meaning of life and of finding ourselves involved in the adventure of holiness. People who risk whole heartedly are ultimately peaceful. Finally, it is the choice which God has made for us as he has chosen us and formed us in his own image and has planned a plan for us. Let us then respond to the divine call given to us and live this kingdom to the full.

In order to better understand people's views of the world, a researcher once placed two children, one a pessimist and the other an optimist, alone in separate rooms. The pessimist was placed in a colourful room full of all kinds of imaginative toys...the optimist was put in a room filled with horse manure. The first child played in the room for a little while, but soon came to the door asking to leave because the toys were boring and because they broke too easily. Likewise, the young optimist soon came to the door...but rather than asking to leave, she asked for a shovel. Of course, the researcher asked the child why she wanted a shovel. She replied, "With all this manure around, I know that there must be a pony in here somewhere."

A hermit was meditating by a river when a young man interrupted him. "Master, I wish to become your disciple," said the man. "Why?" replied the hermit. The young man thought for a moment and said: "Because I want to find God." The master jumped up, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, dragged him into the river, and plunged his head under water. After holding him there for a minute, with him kicking and struggling to free himself, the master finally pulled him up out of the river. The young man coughed up water and gasped to get his breath. When he eventually quieted down, the master spoke. "Tell me, what you wanted most of all when

you were under water." "Air!" answered the man. "Very well," said the master. "Go home and come back to me when you want God as much as you just wanted air."

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