Lectio Divina – 17th Sunday of the Year A

Matthew’s Gospel (in brief)

* Composed between 80-90 CE
* Author is anonymous, but named as ‘Matthew the tax collector’ by later tradition.
* Written in scholarly ‘synagogue’ Greek.
* Incorporates almost the entire Gospel of Mark, plus material from Q and material unique to Matthew.
* Structured around 5 major discourses (each ends with the phrase: “When Jesus had finished….”:
  1. Prologue – chapters 1- 4 Genealogy, Nativity & Infancy
  2. 1st: 5-7 Sermon on the Mount
  3. 2nd: 10 Missionary Discourse
  4. **3rd: 13 Parable Discourse**
  5. 4th: 18 Community Discourse
  6. 5th: 23-25 Apocalyptic Judgement Discourses
* May be a parallel for the 5 books of the Pentateuch - Jesus the new Moses.
* Jesus first words are ‘to fulfil all righteousness’.
* A handbook for Church leaders to assist them in teaching and preaching, worship, mission and polemic.
* 2 broad categories: discourse & narrative.
* The only Gospel to explicitly mention the ‘Church’ – Matthew is theologian of the church.
* Initially addressed to a Jewish-Christian audience – only late in the Gospel is there openness to Gentiles.
* Names Jesus as ‘Messiah’ at the very beginning and throughout the Gospel.

Matthew 13:44-52 - things to notice

* We are in the middle section of Matthew’s Gospel. The focus of these Sundays is: unfolding the mystery of God’s Kingdom:
  1. Revelation of the Kingdom to the simple
  2. Parable about the Sower [questions about Jesus’ use of parables/explanation of the parable]
  3. Parable about the Sower of good seed, [parables of the mustard seed & the yeast; good seed parable explained]
  4. **Parables about the Treasure in the Field, the Fine Pearl, the Fishing (Drag) Net**
* Given that Matthew’s Gospel was intended as a kind of handbook for leaders of early Christian communities, it is probable that the parables presented in the Gospel serve to give leaders both a text and a method for their teaching and preaching.
* The parable in this week’s Gospel follows immediately from last week’s long Gospel reading.
* First parable – the Kingdom is identified with a ‘treasure’ and the person who finds it stumbles across the treasure by accident. The detail of reburying the treasure and buying the field was a common part of land transactions at the time. I’m intrigued by the apparent deceit of the man who discovers the treasure. What does that mean?
* Second parable – the Kingdom is identified with a pearl of great price which is not stumbled across, but is found after a long and careful search. A reassurance that those who seek always find, etc.
* Third parable – the Kingdom is identified as a fisherman’s dragnet which hauls up all sorts of things, some good, some bad, some useful, some to be thrown away. It is a note of reality in what might otherwise become mere spiritual fantasy. The Kingdom is full of all sorts – saints and sinners – and God will do the final sorting out. Those in the Kingdom shouldn’t attempt to do that. It also suggests that life in the Kingdom can be confusing and ambiguous.
* Finally, there is a parable of parables at the end. The meaning is a bit obscure, but Mark O’Brien suggest that Jesus is passing on the mantle of preaching in parables to the disciples. They will proclaim the Gospel in ways both old and new. The old being the parables they have learnt form Jesus and the new being new parables they may compose to convey his teaching.

The Liturgical Context

The Sunday Gospels Sundays 14-17: The Mystery of God’s Kingdom

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|  |  | First Reading | Second Reading | Gospel |
| 14th Sunday | Revelation to the Simple | Zechariah 9:9-10 | Romans 8:9, 11-13 | Matthew 11:25-30 |
| 15th Sunday | Parable Sermon 1 | Isaiah 55:10-11 | Romans 8:18-23 | Matthew 13:1-23 |
| 16th Sunday | Parable Sermon 2 | Wisdom 12:13, 16-19 | Romans 8:26-27 | Matthew 13:24-43 |
| **17th Sunday** | **Parable Sermon 3** | **1 Kings 3:5, 7-12** | **Romans 8:28-30** | **Matthew 13:44-52** |

Liturgical Setting for this Sunday

The first reading is from the Old Testament Book of Kings. In it God promises to give Solomon whatever he asks for. Solomon, aware of his youth and inexperience, asks for a wise and discerning heart. God is very impressed! Solomon has not asked for riches, long life or victory over his enemies, but for what he needs to fulfil his vocation as shepherd king of God’s people.

Perhaps it’s a reminder that, where the Kingdom is concerned, discernment is a necessary accompaniment.

Reflection

*Close encounters with the Kingdom of God*

In the Gospel, Jesus compares the Kingdom to treasure hidden in a field, to a merchant on the lookout for fine pearls and to a fisherman’s dragnet which brings in a very mixed catch.

The point of the parables is the behaviour of the people in them.

In the first parable someone stumbles across the treasure by chance. Sometimes that can happen to us, too. We are happily living our lives when, by chance, something happens or we meet someone and our lives change for ever. On reflection we discern the presence of God in that encounter.

In the second parable the Kingdom is found after a long search. It is a reassurance that those who seek always find, and those who knock on the door will always have it opened.

The third parable introduces a note of reality: the Kingdom is a mixture of all kinds of things and some sorting out is needed.

In the first two parables the joy and delight of those who find (experience) the Kingdom is obvious. It is so strong that nothing is spared in order to possess the Kingdom.

The purpose of parables is not to provide answers to questions but to get us to think.

As we know, the Kingdom of God is not a ‘thing’ or a ‘place’. It is an experience or an encounter with the life of God.

In the life and ministry of Jesus many people experienced the Kingdom through their encounter with him which brought dignity, love, forgiveness, release from illness, disability, guilt, shame and even death. Jesus made present the reign of God’s grace for people in all kinds of need.

While we are sometimes overwhelmed by the experience of the presence of God within our hearts, more often we experience the reign of God’s grace through others. These people, like Jesus, somehow make present, make real the presence and action of God especially (but not only) in our moments of need.

Having experienced that, we too, want to possess, to find and hold onto the Source which touched us so deeply and brought us hope, comfort and freedom.

The kingdom, as we are reminded in the third parable, is a mixed bag of good and rotten fish, saints and sinners. It is not the task of members of the kingdom to judge; the final sorting out belongs to God alone. In the meantime, patience and tolerance must guide the practice of those in the kingdom.

The people of the kingdom seek the things that are of real value in life. They are prepared to make great sacrifices in order to make them their own. They live their lives with virtue and wisdom and their lives are a blessing for others as they draw from their rich store of values and virtues, of wisdom and grace. They never stop seeking the things of real value, the riches of the kingdom and they never stop making God present for those around them.