

Commentary to the 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time –Year A

The Joy of Discovering a Treasure

Introduction



The archaeologist Carter remained for some moments stunned, shocked, almost paralyzed when he introduced a candle in a hole in the untouched tomb of Tutankhamun. He saw the richest treasure ever discovered. The three friends who were with him insistently asked, anxious to know what had bewitched him. He managed to stammer, "Wonderful things, wonderful things!" Were it not for this treasure of Tutankhamen—a pharaoh of the eighteenth dynasty, who died at nineteen years old—we barely would remember the name.

Solomon lived in pomp: "I have acquired—he said—silver and gold, the treasure of kings and nations and what most delights people" (Ecl 2:8), but these treasures did not make him famous.

'Treasure' is the most recurrent epithet on the lips of lovers. You cannot live without tying your heart

to a treasure; not even God can help it, in fact, "he has chosen Israel as his possession" (Ps 135:4). The treasure of the wise is wisdom: "Not worth mentioning are coral and jasper; the price of wisdom is above the biggest pearl. The topaz of Ethiopia cannot equal it; it cannot be valued in pure gold" (Job 28:18-19). The rabbis devoted time and energy to it because it is written, "meditate on it day and night" (Jos 1:8) and commented: "Go and look which hour is neither day nor night and consecrate it to other sciences."

In choosing the treasure one can also be fooled because it is easy to get dazzled, and trust in what is inconsistent, unreliable. Jesus warns us: "Do not store up treasures for yourself here on earth, where moth and rust destroy it, and where thieves can steal it. Store up treasures for yourself with God, where no moth or rust can destroy it, nor thief come and steal it. For where your treasures is, there also will your heart be" (Mt 6:19-21).

Life is to be invested, one has to choose; one needs to wage on a treasure. Which one?

To internalize the message, we repeat:

"Teach us to number our days that we may gain the wisdom of the heart."

-----1st Reading | 2nd Reading |
Gospel-----

First reading: 1 Kings 3:5.7-12

The last years of David's reign were not peaceful and happy: riots, revolts, attempts to dethrone him. Three of his sons died violently in the intrigues to gain power. The unrest continued until Solomon was able to seize power. He was not a warrior like his father. There were no enemies to fight; he was a man of peace. He inherited a large kingdom that was to be kept united and ruled with justice and equity. He succeeded.

He was a skilled politician, a great builder, a very rich man, but he became famous for his wisdom. In the Old Testament his name is cited about three hundred times and it means "peace," "prosperity." From all over the world people flocked to Jerusalem to meet and hear him. The most famous visit was that of the Queen of Sheba who admired his wisdom and exclaimed: "All that I heard in my own land concerning you and your wisdom was true. Fortunate are your servants who are ever in your presence and hear your wisdom. Blessed be Yahweh your God, who has looked kindly on you and has put you on the throne of Israel, he has made you king so that you may dispense justice and righteousness" (1 Kg 10:6-9).

From where did he get so much wisdom? Today's reading tells us of it. Before starting to govern, Solomon went to the sanctuary of Gibeon to offer sacrifices. During the night the Lord appeared to him in a dream and asked him to make a wish; whatever he had asked he would be granted. He did not ask anything for himself: neither wealth, nor health, or victory against the enemies (v. 11).

David was young when, at the suggestion of Bathsheba—Uriah's wife, which later became the favorite—he had designated Salomon as his successor. He realized that he was still inexperienced. He was aware how easy it is for those in power to be corrupted by the frenzy for power and make mistakes and injustices. He asked God, "an understanding mind in governing your people that I may discern

between good and evil” (v. 9). He was heard. The Lord granted him a wise and discerning heart as no one has had before him or anyone after him shall ever have (v. 12).

It was the beginning of his fortune: "I will also give you what you have not asked for—the Lord said—both wealth and fame; and no king shall be your equal during your lifetime” (v. 13). All the other goods came to him from wisdom. The Queen of Sheba, "when she had seen all the wisdom of Solomon, the palace he had built, the food on his table, the residence of his officials, the attendance of his servants and their clothing, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings which he offered at Yahweh’ House, it left her breathless” (1 Kg 10:4-5).

Finding ourselves in front of Aladdin's lamp and if we could make a wish, we probably would ask not "a heart capable to listen to the voice of the Lord." We have not the wisdom of Solomon: we have not understood that the “wisdom of God" requires to renounce any real good, but it 's the source of all good.

Second Reading: Romans 8:28-30

It is easy to believe that God exists and that He created the world. It’s more difficult to believe in His providence. Despite the seemingly contradictory signs that we verify every day, to conclude that he will succeed in carrying out his project is hard. The words with which the reading begins are an invitation to hope. Nothing of what happens escapes God; nothing can surprise him. He makes "all work for the good" and the realization of salvation (v. 28).

In the second part of the passage (vv. 29-30) the stages of the path that leads to salvation are recalled. There is above all the eternal predestination: God chooses those who are destined to become his children; then there is the call: through preaching, the gospel is proclaimed to those who are predestined and the invitation is addressed to accept it. Justification follows the call, that is, the inner transformation that takes place in baptism. Finally there is the glorification, the moment when the new condition of the children of God becomes manifest.

Of this whole process, the moment that leaves us a bit puzzled is the first: predestination. Does it perhaps mean that God chooses some and rejects others? Absolutely not. It means that, even before being called to salvation, people, all people, are the object of God's eternal love. Naturally, only a part of them will have the good fortune to come to know the gospel and be baptized; but God wants everyone else to be saved (1 Tim 2:4).

Gospel: Matthew 13:44-52

It often happens that the archeologists discover, under the floors of houses, boxes or pots containing coins. They were probably placed there by the owners before turning to a hasty escape. In the imminence of war or of an enemy’s invasion, everyone tried to hide in a hurry whatever valuable they had and whatever they could not take with them. They hoped to recover it one day, as soon as the danger had passed. The real owners many times did not come back and the house was occupied by others who had no suspicion of the wealth that lay beneath their feet.

At the time of Jesus treasures discovered by accident were fantasized. It was said of the poor laborers who, intending to plow another’s field, accidentally struck an obstacle. They bent to check and found a box full of jewelry, gems, precious stones. The popular imagination loved to lull with these dreams of

unexpected strokes of luck.

The first parable in today's Gospel (v. 44) takes one of these stories: by pure accident a man discovers a treasure in the field he is working. He hides it again, goes to sell everything he has and buys that field.

Many stopped to quibble the moral behavior of this man and the legality of the financial transaction carried out by him. However this is not the point in question. The commentators were intrigued by the fact that the discovered treasure was hidden again. It apparently seemed illogical and superfluous. This detail is instead precious. There is reason to believe that the poor farmer, attracted by the unmistakable sparkle of a golden object that has emerged from the ground, immediately intuited that, under the clods, an immense wealth could be hidden. He did not want to lose even a crumb, so he decided to buy the whole field.

We are thus introduced in the parable: the treasure which Jesus speaks about is the kingdom of heaven, the new condition where one who welcomes the proposals of the Beatitudes enters. It has an incalculable value and is only gradually discovered by one who decided to wager his own life on it.

The fact that this treasure is found by chance indicates its gratuity. God offers it freely to people. It is not a prize for their good works.

There is but a behavior to assume in front of this gift. Who finds it out should not hesitate, be perplexed or doubt. If one hesitates, he loses precious time, a favorable opportunity may escape and not come again. The decision must be taken urgently; the choice cannot be delayed. One cannot miss the appointment with the Lord.

Then one has to bet everything. One is not asked to give up something, but to move all his thoughts, attention, interests, efforts to the new target.

The treasure—as it will also happen with the pearl—is not purchased to be sold and to repossess the goods found, but to keep it in lieu of what, until then, had given meaning to life. The discovery of the kingdom of God involves a radical change. This is the meaning of the decision to “sell everything one has to buy the field.

This is what happened to Paul, the Jew and blameless fanatic, convinced that the Torah was the treasure that would give him salvation. One day, on his way to Damascus, he met Christ. All those things that he might have considered as profit, he reckoned as loss. "But once I found Christ, I have let everything fall away and I now consider all as garbage, if instead I may gain Christ" (Phil 3:7-8).

Such a change causes surprise, wonder, amazement. Who has not found the same treasure cannot comprehend, cannot find an explanation that justifies the novelty of life of one who has entered the kingdom of God.

Who has seen the farmer selling everything to buy the field must have thought he was crazy: the barren and rocky land of Palestine does not justify such sacrifices. He alone was conscious of his choice: he was concluding the deal of his life.

Who knew Paul—the scrupulous law observing rabbi—and suddenly saw him abandon his security to wager all for a condemned man must have considered him a fool: "Paul, you are mad; your great learning has deranged your mind" (Acts 26:24) . Instead Paul had found the most valuable asset, "Christ crucified! For the Jews a great scandal. And for the Greeks, what nonsense" (1 Cor 1:23).

By his joy, all—the farmer's neighbors and Paul's co-religionists—should have realized that he was acting with lucidity and for good reason. One who knew of possessing an unexpected and not hoped treasure cannot but be filled with joy: "My joy overflows" (2 Cor 7:4)—ensures the Apostle—"I rejoice in the Lord" (Phil 4:10); "The kingdom of God is 'joy' (Rom 14:17).

In short, whoever observes the radiant face of someone who has found the kingdom of God would guess that he had glimpsed on, like the archaeologist Carter, "wonderful things."

The second parable (vv. 15-16) is called twin of the previous one and contains the same message. It differs in some significant details: first of all, the protagonist is not a poor laborer, but a wealthy merchant who travels the world with a very specific goal: to find pearls.

In ancient times, pearls were valuable as diamonds are now. They were harvested from the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. In imperial era, they were considered the most valuable thing, so as to become proverbial. Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, was worshiped as the goddess of pearls. A much loved child was called "pearl"; a wise man is said to have a mouth from which pearls came out. The twelve gates of heaven—writes the seer of the Apocalypse—"were twelve pearls; each port is made of a single colossal and wonderful pearl" (Rev 21:21). Being considered of great value, Jesus chose them as an image of the inestimable treasure that he offered: the kingdom of God.

Unlike the farmer who accidentally stumbles into a treasure, the merchant finds the pearl after an exhausting search. The two discoveries are results, one of a good fortune, the other of one's commitment.

The behavior of the merchant is the image of the man who passionately seeks what gives meaning to his life and fills his days with joy.

The two parables are complementary: the kingdom of God on the one hand is a free gift of God, and on the other is also a fruit of man's diligence.

The third parable (vv. 47-50) takes up the theme introduced last Sunday in the parable of the wheat and the tares. The image is taken from fishing on the Sea of Galilee where nets and trawls that caught good fish but also inedible or unclean ones were employed (Lev 11:10-11). On the beach the fishermen proceeded to the separation. Thus—Jesus says—it happens in the kingdom of heaven.

According to the view of the ancients, the sea was the kingdom of the evil forces, enemies of life. The mission to "fish for people," removing them from the power of evil was given to the disciples. Uncontrollable passions, egoism, greed envelop them like raging waves, which, like a vortex, drag them into the abyss. The kingdom of heaven is a net that pulls them out, makes them breathe, leads them toward the light, toward salvation.

In this net not only the good and the capable are welcomed, but everyone, without distinction. The kingdom of God does not present itself today in a pure state; within the Christian community the presence of evil and of sin is serenely accepted beside the good. No one, though impure, must feel left out or be marginalized. This is time of mercy and the patience of God who "does not want anyone to perish, but that all may come to conversion" (2 P 3:9).

Of course the time of separation will come and Matthew, as he usually does, talks about it using the dramatic language of the preachers of his time. He employs images with which the Bible described the destruction of the enemies of the people of Israel (Ez 30:38-39): the righteous shall enter in peace and the wicked will be punished in a fiery prison,

In rabbinic literature this judgment of God is often talked about. It is not to threaten eternal punishment for sinners, but to highlight the importance of the present time and the urgency of the decisions to take today: Every moment wasted is definitively lost and mistakes done in this world will have eternal consequences. The possibility of dissipating, squandering one's own existence focusing it on wrong treasures is anything but remote. However, in the end, the separation will not be between good and bad, but between good and evil. Only the good will enter heaven, all the negativity will be annihilated first...by the fire of God's love.

The discourse of Jesus concludes with the question: "Have you understood" and with the call to the work of the scribe (vv. 51-52). The question is addressed to the disciples, to those who have found the treasure and the pearl of great price. The kingdom of heaven they now possess has been prepared through the Old Testament (old things) and realized in Christ (the new stuff). Christians are encouraged to become aware, be well-informed, through the study of the sacred Scriptures, of the immense gift they have received from God.

Fr. Fernando Armellini - <http://bibleclaret.org>