

Hidden Treasure
17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Mt 13:44-52)

Jesus was a great teacher, and all who heard him remembered the things he said. He had a unique style, which was to speak in parables. A parable is a little story or comparison that hides its lesson inside.

Jesus would tell parables based on various occupations: shepherding, farming, fishing, building. For instance, the parable of the sower is based on farming.

Jesus would often incorporate a sense of humor when telling parables, by using exaggeration, or presenting something in a comical fashion. For instance, comparing a rich man to a camel being forced through a “needle’s eye” (Mt 19:24), or removing a splinter from your brother’s eye when you have a pole stuck in your own (Mt 7:3-5).

His disciples asked him why he always spoke to the crowd in parables. And Jesus answered by quoting Isaiah: “*because they look but do not see, and hear but do not listen or understand*” (Mt 13:13). Jesus explained that his strategy was to deliberately conceal or hide the message, because not everyone understood the secrets of the Kingdom of God: “*To you knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted, but not to them*” (Mt 13:11).

Jesus did not directly talk about the things of God, which are deep mysteries, which he calls “secrets” (Mt 13:11). Instead, he *concealed* the truths inside the parables, making each parable a type of riddle. You have to figure out what he is saying, in order to understand.

It is a great privilege to learn the deepest things of God’s inner heart, and never take them for granted. Jesus wants us to have respect and appreciation, and so he makes us work for our spiritual nourishment. He makes us search in order to understand; he wants to see if we have enough love and interest to seek him out.

The teachings of God are only for those who want to learn: “*Blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears, because they hear. Amen, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it*” (Mt 13:16-17).

In today’s Gospel, we have three more parables of Jesus. Once again, they are riddles, which we have to figure out. Jesus says the kingdom of God is “like a net thrown into the sea, which catches fish of every kind.” What is he talking about? It the Church. The boat is a symbol of the Church, headed up by the Pope, who follows St. Peter the first fisher-of-men. The fishermen in the boat are the

apostles and their successors. The sea is the world. The Church goes out into the world, and through the preaching of the Gospel (net) brings into the Kingdom of God men of all nations (i.e., all the different kinds of fish), to the point that the boat becomes full. It then arrives at the shore, which is the end of time and history, when the great haul is brought before God for judgement. The good and the bad will be sorted out by the angels. It is a simple but wonderful image for the Church, which we often use in art, and even in the design of our churches. For instance, the part of the Church that holds all the “fish” is still called the “nave,” which means “boat.”

In another parable, Jesus says the Kingdom of God is “like a treasure buried in a field, which a man discovers, and then sells everything he has to buy that field.” The treasure is buried, *hidden*. Walking past the field, you will not see and realize there is anything special about it. Even if you go onto the field and walk across it, it will just seem to be ordinary. Again, Jesus gives a riddle.

This is a parable about our Catholic faith, and the great treasure which it possesses inside, which is Christ himself. Christ is present in the Church in several ways, but two in particular stand out: the Scriptures, and the Sacraments. Hidden beneath the “surface” or externals of the sacramental rituals, are the treasures and grace of heaven. Above all, this is true of the Eucharist.

How many people drive by our church every day, and look onto the property? They see a nice church building, but that is all. They keep driving. That is not enough to find salvation. Jesus is here, but he is hidden. You can’t see him from the road.

Or what if they walk onto the field, and spend some time inside? There are many people who come to church, like strangers and visitors, seekers. To be honest, they don’t have a clue where they are, or what is going on. They’re chewing gum, they’re dressed for the beach, they sit down without genuflecting, when Mass finally begins and the priest says all these prayers they are lost, they don’t know how to respond or what you are supposed to do. After they leave, they comment about the music, or question why we perform all these rituals, and especially why there are all these rules about receiving the piece of “bread.” Unless they have someone to explain things to them, they will not appreciate or understand much. It is possible to walk on the field, come to Mass, but still only see the surface, and never discover the treasure.

The Kingdom of Heaven is a treasure “buried in a field.” It must be discovered. Once it has been discovered, people will even sell their possessions – joyfully – in order to possess that field and devote their lives to mining the spiritual gold. During the California “gold rush,” people packed up their belongings into

wagons and risked everything to find earthly wealth. The mystery of the Kingdom of God is the mystery of religious vocations: men and women abandoning the world, forsaking a career of their own, even a family of their own, in order to possess the hidden treasure of God, risking all to engage in a lifetime of “digging.”

It begins with Holy Scripture, which is the Church’s “treasure map.” God’s riches are indeed hidden and invisible to the surface, but God does not leave us to stumble around randomly. He shows us exactly where to look, where to dig. The Scriptures lead us infallibly to the treasure which is Christ. He is the living Word hidden in the written words. By “digging into Scripture,” especially the Gospels, we discover Christ, and are led to him. The Scriptures are extensive, and provide a lifetime of opportunity for study and exploration.

In order to help us with this journey through the Bible, the Church provides the *Catechism*, a compilation of the doctrines of the faith which God has revealed in Christ, and which are received through the Scripture and Sacred Tradition. One of the most important parts of the *Catechism* is the abundant footnotes, which provide references to the Bible for each doctrine being articulated. In addition, the footnotes provide constant reference to the vast body of the Church’s Sacred Tradition: decrees of Church councils, pronouncements of popes, writings of the great Church Fathers and Doctors, admonitions of saints. The field is indeed vast and *deep*, in which we have the luxury and opportunity to discover the infinite treasures of Christ, and the riches of the Christian way of life.

The monk “joyfully” devotes himself to this lifelong task, this spiritual work of digging called “*lectio divino*,” meditation, sacred study. But each Christian, to the degree possible, undertakes a personal program of catechetical instruction and Bible study, that faith in Christ might be nourished.

Together with study there must be prayer and devotion, and an active engagement in the celebration of the liturgy. From Christ in Scripture, we come to Christ in the Sacraments, above all the Eucharist. Everything in the Church will lead us to this discovery of Christ hidden in the heart of the Church under the sacramental appearance of bread and wine.

For most Catholics, the lifelong task of exploring Scripture and Doctrine in a monastic setting is beyond their reach, and it is not the initial way Christ is discovered. People typically start digging in the field of the Church, because they see others who have already found the treasure! We benefit from the faith of others, who first bring us to the field, then show us what treasure it contains, and how to dig for ourselves. A visitor to the Mass may not have a clue as to what it contains, but in witnessing the reverence of those around him, has no doubt there is something very special and valuable here. Even the simple act of a reverent

genuflection toward the tabernacle is an acknowledgement of the presence of a great King that moves a stranger to start scratching the surface.

The mysteries of heaven are profound truths that are hidden in ordinary things; hidden in the simple parables of Jesus, hidden in the Sacred Scriptures, hidden in the sacramental rites and symbols of the liturgy. Catholicism is not for the lazy, or faint of heart. We are made to work for our nourishment. The Kingdom of God will be missed by those who focus only on appearance: the “outside,” the externals. Christ is discovered by going deeper.