

SERMON: Matt 13.44-58, Romans 8.26-39: The Greatest Pearl of Wisdom-Our Father's Love

Most loving Father, we thank you for creating us as your children. We praise you for your unerring efforts to restore us to your loving arms. We adore you for your unshakeable love, shown to us through your Son our Lord Jesus. Amen.

The word that struck me most from today's readings was "wisdom". Over the past few weeks we have been learning from the wisdom that Jesus imparts through his parables. Our gospel text from Matthew 8. 44-58 is a powerful example of how Jesus uses three real life situations to get across the wisdom about God's kingdom to his disciples.

Verse 44 tells of the labourer who finds great treasure in a field and then sells everything he has to legally buy that field. In ancient days banks were not used by ordinary people. Instead they would often bury their valuables in the soil but sometimes that person may die without ever having told anyone else what they'd done. In that circumstance Jewish law allowed whoever subsequently bought the land and found the treasure, to own it. So the disciples would have understood this dynamic well. But the message isn't about Jewish ethics. Jesus uses this background to illustrate how precious the kingdom of heaven is. Verse 45 hammers home the same point, when, just like the labourer, the merchant sells everything he has, this time, for a pearl of great value.

These two comparisons challenged the disciples then, and us today, to consider: Are we so filled with joy about God's kingdom that we value it above all else?

Answering this can be difficult when the world around us is so NOT as we envisage God's kingdom. Last week Helen spoke of *"God's good purposes in God's good time. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. It is close and coming. It is here and not yet."* The third situation Jesus uses in verse 47 to 50 speaks to this reality once more. Fishermen casting a dragnet to catch both good and bad sea creatures was commonplace work. Jesus uses it to stress that the fullness of God's kingdom is yet to come. Only at the end of the age will things be put to the right. Only then will God's good purposes be fully realised. But it begs the question: "How are we meant to endure the 'not yet' time?" Before I explore what our other readings have to say about this, I want to set the scene by referring to an excerpt from the film: "The Shack".

In this film, Mackenzie Phillips' life is shattered when his youngest child Missy is kidnapped and murdered during a camping trip while he is saving his other two children, Kate and Josh in a canoeing accident.

Facing a crisis of faith, he receives a mysterious letter urging him to an abandoned shack in the Oregon wilderness. Despite his doubts, Mackenzie journeys to the shack and encounters a trio of strangers who gradually reveal their identities: an African-American woman is symbolically God (Papa), a Middle-Eastern man is Jesus, and an Asian woman is the Holy Spirit. Mackenzie also visits another cave where God's wisdom, in the form of an angelic woman named Sophia, talks to him.

Sophia is of course the Greek word for 'wisdom'. The tactics used by this angel Sophia seem a bit brutal. But they do bring home some crucial pearls of wisdom.

First, the Evil one is responsible for the bad things that happen in this "not yet" time- God is not to blame. Sophia knew that MacKenzie blamed God for the death of his daughter. She dragged that confession out of him so he could confront his accusing, judgement of God and be set free by a deeper wisdom. It challenges us to check our own beliefs. We all have had painful experiences in our lives – is there part of us that blames God for what happened then or perhaps, is happening right now?

The key to being set free from that accusatory prison, a prison that poisons our relationship with God, is forcefully presented when Sophia demands that Mackenzie judge his own children. But he can't do it. Mackenzie's love for his children reflects the true heart of our Heavenly Father for us all. Paul expresses this well in Verse 35 from Romans 8 when he asks:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword?

The resounding answer in verse 37 is:

No, in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Paul then ends this section of his letter with the beautiful declaration of his faith that nothing in this world can ever, ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Such deep words of wisdom. And this faith leads us to the second wise pearl to be learnt from the video.

Sophia challenges Mackenzie again, this time by rejecting his longing for a world with no pain. In this “not Yet” time pain is inevitable but there is a way to get through it- it requires trust.

Do we trust that through Jesus’ love, we are conquerors over all things in our life, no matter how painful they may be?

And do we trust, as verse 28 of our Romans readings suggests, that God will use everything in the lives of those who love Him for a good purpose?

If these pearls of wisdom were just theological ideas then we would surely be lost. But they are so much more than that- they are part of the lived experience of each follower of Jesus. Verses 29 and 30 remind us that being a Christian is to accept the power of God as he lovingly unfolds his plan to save all humanity. He does not callously choose just an elect group for salvation; it is we who have been given the power to choose God. And when we make that free choice, then we can ask to be given the faith to endure all things that we face in life. As Paul proclaims in verse 31: *“What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?”*

Brothers and sisters, as we navigate our way through this “not yet” world, I pray that we will find peace and comfort in the sure and certain wisdom that in all things, God is for us. May we abide in his presence knowing that nothing can ever separate us from His steadfast and abundant love. In the name of Jesus, AMEN.