

17th Sunday per Annum - A
I Kings 3::5, 7-12;
Romans 8:28-30;
Matthew 12:44-52
Little Flower - 7/30/23

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today's Gospel contains three very short parables; the parable of the treasure buried in the field, the parable of the pearl of great price, and the parable of the good and bad fish. All three are among the parables of the kingdom in Matthew's Gospel.

The first two are very simple. In both, the finders go off and sell what they have to be able to buy what they found. In both cases, the finders were first seekers, one a treasure hunter and the other a merchant seeking fine pearls. The truth is we are all seekers. All of us are seeking happiness. We know this because we are never completely happy. No person, no created thing, has the ability to fulfill all our needs and desires. As St. Augustine wrote, "My heart will never rest until it rests in you, O Lord." For us today, I would suggest that both parables challenge our priorities. If the treasure and the pearl both represent the kingdom of God, they suggest that the seekers made finding the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God their first priority.

The question for us is where does God and God's kingdom fit into our priorities. It is very easy to say that God is our first priority. How we live, however, proves or disproves our words. Do we pray daily? Do we attend Mass every Sunday or almost every Sunday? How faithfully do we keep the commandments? Do we treat all people with respect and dignity? Do we share our time, talent, and treasure with others?

The third parable takes us in a different direction. Good fish will be kept, and bad fish will be thrown away. This parable reminds us that our actions have consequences both in this life and in the life to come. I think today most of us struggle with the idea that God will judge us and that we will be rewarded or punished according to our deeds. We want to believe in a God who because he is all merciful will forgive us for anything we did or did not do without any repentance on our part.

There are at least two reasons why we should not believe this. First, as much as Jesus talks about God's mercy and forgiveness, he and other New Testament authors remind us that God will hold us accountable for our lives. Second, love cannot be forced. If we are not free to reject God and his love, then we are no longer free.

Today's first reading also illustrates priorities. God invited Solomon to ask for anything he wished. I recently read a book that suggested that the two most important qualities married couples need to have are self-awareness and empathy. In this passage, for a young man, Solomon demonstrated great self-awareness. He realized he was young, lacked life experience, but was king of a great kingdom. Therefore, he asked for wisdom, i.e., an understanding heart that would allow him to distinguish right from wrong. One could argue that Solomon demonstrated wisdom in asking for wisdom.

According to tradition, the Oracle of Delphi made the statement that the philosopher Socrates was the wisest man in Athens. Socrates set out to prove the oracle wrong by visiting all the recognized wise men in Athens. However, after he had visited them all, he concluded that he was indeed the wisest of them all because he was the only one who knew what he did not know. In fact, when I give marriage instructions, I always tell couples how important it is to know what they do not know, i.e., when they need to slow down making a decision, when they need to do more research, and/or when they need to seek advice.

My brothers and sisters, Paul's words to the Romans are some of the most hope-filled words in the New Testament: "*We know all things work for good for those who love God.*" If we allow ourselves to grow into the likeness of the Risen Christ, if we allow ourselves to become the-best-version-of-ourselves, God promises that all things will work out for good even if they do not seem good in the short term.