

**Homily notes: (live recording at Mass will expand and vary):**  
**17th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A**

We are familiar with people who comb our beaches and fields with metal detectors, searching for what they hope is hidden treasure. And we hear of some amazing finds, some going way, way back in history.

I'm always conscious of that, as at St Pancras Old Church, the medieval church behind the London railway station, and with roots going back far earlier than the time of St Augustine; after the Civil War in Cromwell's time, the church silver, which was an old chalice and paten, and a large flagon for wine, all dating from Elizabeth I's time of 1598, were buried in the churchyard, and then only discovered in the 1860's, when the railway was coming in to form St Pancras, now international Station.

'Surprised by Joy' is the title of the spiritual autobiography of C.S. Lewis, Professor at Oxford, who was converted to Christianity during his time there, during a friendship with Catholic J.R.R. Tolkien. Later in life he married Joy Davidman, but only for a short time, for she died of cancer within 4 years. Many think it is about their relationship, but it isn't. It is his story which links with today's gospel, finding the pearl of great price or treasure hidden in a field, as he encountered Jesus.

Pope Francis, in his first Apostolic Exhortation to us in his first year as Pope *Evangelii Gaudium*; begins; 'The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, joy is constantly born anew.'

All of that comes together as both people mentioned in the first two parables today are surprised by the joy of finding hidden treasure or a pearl of great price. Surprise fill them with joy, even if they don't yet possess it.

Just a glimpse, yet enough. Jesus makes the point the person is willing to put everything aside in their life so they can obtain the treasure or pearl.

That is in contrast to another gospel meeting when a rich young man who had glimpsed Jesus, but couldn't bring himself to give up everything for

Jesus. We may be new to faith, we may have had and lived it most if not all of our life, but each occasion we hear this gospel the challenge is there: Are we surprised by the joy of believing, the joy of belonging; the joy of finding Jesus, or rather he has found us? I do know many often say to me, esp. in times of crisis, or at the end of life; thank God for faith, and we don't know how people without it manage!

The joy in the gospel passage motivates them to re-order their priorities to ensure the treasure, the pearl is their own. For that we need the wisdom Solomon prayed for in our 1<sup>st</sup> reading.

Lockdown, and the continuation of 'not normal times' gives us many opportunities to reflect on our treasure, Jesus Wherever Jesus went he brought joy through his forgiveness, his healings, his teachings. The discovery may come in a sudden, surprising conversion or after years of patient seeking.

The word to describe a net which brings in a haul of all kinds is 'catholic.' The dragnet shows, as last week, how here on earth saint and sinner live side by side. They will be separated by the angels on the last day, just as fishermen separate good and bad fish. The time for separation is not yet, for the boat is still at sea. 'The barque of Peter still charts the choppy waters, and indeed such are the times today. While storms of criticism are blowing and our boat is full of all kinds, what is most needed now is balance. Balance is what Solomon prayed for, and we too pray for the gift of discerning judgment. Wisdom is the first listed of the seven gifts of the Spirit. Joy the second fruit of the Spirit.

Were we singing today, one hymn would be 'Be thou my vision, my wisdom, my best thought, my breastplate, my armour, my treasure thou art.' That 8<sup>th</sup> Century Irish hymn picks up so much of today's readings. Throughout the psalm today the key theme is the blessing given to the worshipper by the very fact of God's law. It is not a burden but a joy, and true wisdom lay in the faithful keeping of God's Law.

And we can also take confidence from St Paul's words in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading that God turns everything to our good. There is always a paradox in Christian thought between the assertion of the absolute power of God and the free choice of the individual believer. Paul sets it out, but doesn't

attempt to resolve them on logical grounds. It is spelt out in terms of those who love God. We are not lost in a maze. We have been called and chosen in the image of God's own Son, the treasure, the pearl. Do we not speak of pearls of wisdom?

One thing I love about our catholic church is the great wisdom of the ages which has maintained the balance between port and starboard, between left and right, between progressive and conservative; between first world and second world and third world: the ability to hold opposites together in balance; the 'Vibrant Paradoxes' which Bishop Robert Barron points out, the Both/And of Catholicism, rather than the either/or.

It celebrates the union of contraries –grace and nature, faith and reason, Scripture and Tradition, body and soul- in a way that the full energy of each opposing element remains in place. Seen through the Incarnation of Jesus, the opposites come together and reflect new light in every direction.

Christ of my own heart whatever befall still be my vision. O Ruler of all.

Listen to recording at 5pm Vigil Mass on Homilies page (with Gospel reading)