Prego Plus: Background Notes

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

First Reading 1 Kings 3: 5, 7–12

Scholars think that the two books which we know as 1 Kings and 2 Kings were originally only one. They build on the history of the monarchy that begins in the books of Samuel.

1 Kings begins with the reign of Solomon. He was not the heir apparent. The kingship should have gone to the eldest living son Adonijah, but Nathan and Bathsheba convinced the dying David to name Solomon as his heir.

This week's passage focuses on Solomon's dream in Gibeon, the seat of an ancient sanctuary called 'the great high place', located 5miles NW of Jerusalem. Now represented by the modern village el-Jib, Gibeon became a priest-city and was probably the main shrine for Israel's worship before the building of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Revelations by dreams are a fairly common device in the Bible (see for example Genesis 20: 3, when God visits Abimelech in a dream; or Matthew 2: 12, when the Magi were warned in a dream not to go back to see Herod).

At the time, the expected answer to God's question *'What would you like me to give you?'* would have been large, imposing monuments and inscriptions to the King's glory and luxury goods.

Instead Solomon's prayer focuses on the past: his faithfulness to God following the example of his father King David; on the present: his feelings of inadequacy as a good leader; and on the future: asking for a *'heart to understand'*.

God praises him and grants his request for discernment and wisdom which will be put to the test in the famous episode of the judgement of Solomon (1 Kings 3: 16–28).

The wisdom to make the right decision when appealed to by his people shows the readers the nature of Kingship under God's guidance and the duties of a King of the Davidic line.

St Beuno's Outreach
IN THE DIOCESE OF WREXHAM

Gospel   Matthew 13: 44–52

For the third consecutive week we are reading and praying parables from Matthew, Chapter 13. For more details about the purpose and meaning of parables, see the Prego Plus for the Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.

The four parables we have today are only found in St Matthew's Gospel. They all try to give the reader an idea of the Kingdom of Heaven and involve to some extent searching, finding, rejoicing and selling everything.

Matthew is now only addressing the disciples, not the crowd.

Treasure hidden in a field

At a time when banks did not exist, it was common practice for people to bury part of their fortune in the hope of protecting it from thieves and brigands. In the Parable of the Talents, the third servant buries his talent (Matthew 25: 18).

Archaeological digs to this day still occasionally come across such hoards. The concept of treasure occurs several times in Matthew's Gospel – see 6: 19–21: 'Do not store up treasures for yourself' or 19: 21: 'Sell what you own … you will have treasure in heaven'.

A merchant looking for fine pearls

Pearls had great value at the time and were sometimes worth more than gold. In both of these parables the people take risks and sell all that they have to attain a greater reward. It could be seen as a way of describing the cost of discipleship.

A dragnet cast into the sea

The scene moves from agriculture and trade to fishing, which was, of course, a setting familiar to the disciples.

As in the Parable of the Wheat and the Darnel read last week, here we find that the Kingdom of Heaven includes 'all kinds', good and bad.

The reference to good fish and those that are 'no use' may also be an allusion to Jewish strict dietary laws.

The Kingdom of Heaven is a mixed body of saints and sinners; the final sorting out can be left to God and his angels at the end of time.

Every scribe who becomes a disciple

Some Christian converts may have been scribes: indeed some scholars see in this phrase a self-description of Matthew.

Things both old and new

The 'old' would be the Law and the Prophets; the 'new' the Gospels, Jesus's teachings. Both are equally needed, as the Gospels are the fulfilment of the Law.