

17th Sunday In Ordinary Time, Year A

A national catastrophe set the stage for the writing of the books of Kings. On July 29, 587 B.C., invading armies breached the walls of Jerusalem. The city was devastated, the walls torn down, the Temple burnt, and the people deported to Babylonia. Zedekiah, the last of the Davidic kings to reign in Jerusalem, was blinded and then led off to die in captivity. The books were written for the Jews whose faith had been jolted by the catastrophe. The author wrote to instruct and encourage them, to bring them to repentance for their sins, and to renew in them hope for the future. In short, he wrote to bolster and reinvigorate their faith. To do so, he went back over four hundred years of their history to show them that they and their kings, not God, had been unfaithful.³

1 Kings 3:5, 7-12

Solomon was the third and last king of the united kingdom after Saul and David. He was called the wisest man who ever lived.¹¹ Wisdom in the scriptures is not an abstract ability to think and philosophize, rather, it is a very practical gift that enables a person to know how to do things well in life and how to judge things correctly. Wisdom was equated with success. What Solomon is really requesting is the ability to govern his people well as their king. Thus his request is not only for himself but also for his people, which pleases God. This reading is chosen in conjunction with today's gospel parables of the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price. Like those parables it reminds us that there are things worth seeking that are important enough to give up everything else to get them.¹

⁵The Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream at night. Revelation by dream was common in the scriptures of the Old Testament.² God said, "Ask something of me and I will give it to you." Solomon answered:

⁷"O Lord, my God, you have made me, your servant, king to succeed my father David; but I am a mere youth, not knowing at all how to act. Solomon was twenty years old at this time.¹²

⁸I serve you in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a people so vast that it cannot be numbered or counted.

⁹Give your servant, therefore, an understanding heart "Heart" in Hebrew usually connotes mental rather than emotional faculties.¹³ to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong. Solomon humbly prays for the ability to judge well when cases are appealed to him as the highest authority in the kingdom. Thus, it amounts to a prayer to govern well for the good of his people. It is for this reason that his prayer is so pleasing to God.² For who is able to govern this vast people of yours?"

¹⁰The Lord was pleased that Solomon made this request.

¹¹So God said to him: "Because you have asked for this—not for a long life for yourself, nor for riches, nor for the life of your enemies, but for understanding so that you may know what is right—

¹²I do as you requested. I give you a heart so wise and understanding that there has never been anyone like you up to now, and after you there will come no one to equal you."

A lot of space has been given to this king who was ultimately unfaithful to the covenant. The extensive description of Solomon's reign is probably best explained as the author's way of encouraging the exiles for whom he wrote by showing them what glory the kingdom could have retained had its kings been faithful.²

Romans 8:28-30

These verses outline the Christian vocation as it was designed by God.

Brothers and sisters:

28We know that all things work for good for those who love God, Our Father gives us what is best for us and expects us to discover his paternal love in difficult as well as in favorable events. St. Bernard points out that this “does not say that things suit our whims, but that they work for our good. They serve not impulse but usefulness; not pleasure but salvation; not what we desire but what is good for us.”⁶ This is why St. Paul tells us to “give thanks in all circumstances for such IS God’s will for you in Christ Jesus!”^(2 Thes 5:18) **who are called according to his purpose.** God’s plan for our salvation will not be overcome by God’s enemies or any difficulties we may face. The point is to encourage the believers to persevere through whatever trials or sufferings they may face, knowing that God has called them and can bring them to glory in the end.¹

29For those he foreknew he also predestined Paul is not speaking here of individual predestination, as if some were destined for salvation and others were destined for condemnation, regardless of their response to God. Rather, Paul is describing the overall plan of God for the salvation of His people.¹ God wills that all would come to salvation but man is free to accept or despise His blessings.⁴ However, the Catechism makes clear that no one is predestined by God for eternal damnation. For this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary.⁵ (CCC 1037) **to be conformed to the image of his Son,** Being Christian involves the fundamental transformation of the whole person from conformity to earthly things to conformity to heavenly things.⁽¹⁴⁾ **so that he might be the firstborn** Jesus is the eldest brother in the family of faith. As adopted children, we look up to him as the perfect image of Sonship and the perfect example of filial obedience to the Father.⁴ **among many brothers and sisters.**

30And those he predestined he also called; and those he called he also justified, and those he justified he also glorified. God’s purpose or plan originated in the unfathomable past. It expresses itself in present history (called...justified) and it continues on into the world to come (glorified). Note that “glorified” is in the past tense, showing that even though from our limited human viewpoint glorification is still in the future, from God’s viewpoint it is already accomplished, hence it is a certainty on which we can rely!¹⁵ The purpose of this text, then, is to encourage the believers to persevere through whatever trials they face, knowing that God has called them and can bring them to glory in the end!¹

Matthew 13:44-52

The following three parables were delivered privately to the disciples “in the house” which means that they were away from the crowds. They were given towards the end of the first or the beginning of the second year of the public ministry.¹⁰ All three parables have to do with the ability to recognize quality when one encounters it and then rejecting what is of lesser value that must be left behind in favor of what is of lasting worth.⁹

Jesus said to his disciples:

44“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, In the unsettled ancient world when the danger of foreign invasion and bands of robbers were common, many householders buried things of value.² **which a person** This could be anyone, even a pagan or unbeliever, who for the first time has discovered the treasures of Christ’s doctrines or it could be a Christian to whom for the first time the inner precious meaning of the Gospel has suddenly been revealed.¹⁰ **finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has** One must be willing to give up, at least in a spirit of detachment, every

other opposing treasure. We cannot have at once and fully enjoy the things of Christ and the things of the world, but when one receives the grace and possesses the strength to give up all else, what treasures are then revealed to the soul!¹⁰ **and buys that field.** It really makes little difference whether, with various authorities, we take the “field” as signifying the *world*; or the *Sacred Scriptures* without their inner, hidden meaning; or the human element in the *Church* which often obscures the spiritual element; or the mere *externals of religion* devoid of all internal spirit and life; and we can understand the “treasure” as meaning *Christ*, or the *teachings of Christ*, or the *Gospel* and its teaching, or the *Church* and its teachings and practices in their spiritual and divine character. The meaning of the parable will be the same in any case, namely, that from the midst of earthly occupations there often suddenly emerges the surpassing spiritual treasures of the Gospel not known, or perceived, or experienced, or appreciated before. A light suddenly rises up in darkness, vision is given where before there was no sight, meanings lately hidden are discerned, peace and happiness and heaven are found where nothing of the sort had been suspected. Such is the spiritual meaning and teaching of the parable.¹⁰

45 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. In this story we have a traveling “merchant” who represents anyone who seeks after Christ and the Messianic Kingdom or Church of Christ and indirectly, every sincere searcher after truth. The “pearl” stands for the Messianic Kingdom or the Church of Christ and all its treasures of teaching, grace, and glory.¹⁰

46 When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it. These two parables underscore the same point. Both stress that the kingdom’s value is inestimable, and surrendering earthly attachments is required to obtain it.⁷ Note that the treasure is something stumbled upon while the pearl is the result of a lengthy search but in both instances the finder is filled with joy.¹⁶

47 Again the kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea, which collects fish of every kind.

48 When it is full they haul it ashore and sit down to put what is good into buckets. What is bad they throw away. The “net” represents the visible Church; the “sea” is the world; the “fishes” are men and women gathered into the Church; the “fishermen” are the Apostles and their successors; the “shore” is the last judgment; those who will make the final separation are the Angels of heaven acting as visible ministers of God’s judgments; the “good” fish are the saved and the “bad” are the lost. The fact that good and bad fish were found in the great net is a warning to us that it is not sufficient for salvation just to be a member of the Church of Christ, to have been baptized, or to participate from time to time in some of the sacred functions of the Church. Only those who are spiritually living will enter into eternal life with God.¹⁰

Like the parable of the wheat and the weeds, both stories foresee the same destiny for the wicked and just as the wheat and weeds must come to ripeness, so the net must be filled before a separating judgment can take place.⁸ The bad ones are thrown away, not back into the sea.⁸

49 Thus it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go out and separate the wicked from the righteous Here again it is the angels and not the apostles who will do the separating at this time of judgment and punishment.⁸

50 and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. Note our Lord’s repeated references to the last things, especially Judgment and hell: he emphasizes these truths because of man’s great tendency to forget them.¹⁶

51 Do you understand all these things?” This refers to the teachings of Jesus about the kingdom as they are expressed in the parables. They include the presence of the kingdom, its small beginnings, the varied responses to it, its extraordinary fullness in the future, and the judgment that will finally occur.⁸ **They answered, “Yes.”**

⁵²And he replied, “Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old.”

Here Jesus is referring to the apostles who are instructed in the kingdom, for he has equipped them to evangelize and catechize the world about the treasures hidden in the Old Covenant and manifest in the New. Matthew’s own ministry follows this pattern: he continually cites the OT to explain its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.⁷ Both the old and the new are valued; the new does not make the old useless.⁸

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers” by Lawrence E. Mick, (2) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary,” (3) “The Books of Kings” by Peter F. Ellis, C.S.S.R., (4) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans” With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (5) “The Catechism of the Catholic Church,” (6) “The Navarre Bible: Romans And Galatians,” (7) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew” With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (8) “The Gospel of Matthew” by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., (9) “Fire Of Mercy, Heart Of The Word” by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, (10) “The Parables Of Christ” By Charles J. Callan, O.P., (11) “The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study Cycle A” by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (12) “The Story of Stories” by Karen Lee-Thorp, (13) The St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology Online founded by Dr. Scott Hahn, (14) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers Year A” by James L. Weaver, (15) “Jewish New Testament Commentary” by David H. Stern, and (16) “The Navarre Bible: St Matthew.”

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.