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Truth or Consequences

By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

What would you ask for if you had the chance to wish for anything with the assurance that your wish would come true? A miraculous cure? A long life? The perfect spouse? Riches, fame or power? We've all daydreamed about such an opportunity. For Solomon such a question was no daydream. Did some of our possible wishes run through his mind? Perhaps, but in the end he chose what was the most valuable and the most pleasing to God: wisdom, "an understanding heart to judge and to distinguish right from wrong." (First Reading, 1 Kings 3:5, 7-12)

Solomon's desire to choose what is truly valuable is Jesus' challenge to us in today's Gospel (Matthew 13:44-52 or Matthew 13:44-46). The kingdom of heaven, eternal life and joy with Jesus, is the most valuable gift we could ever wish for. But while we know this is indeed the most valuable choice we could ever make, worldly attractions and the frenetic pace of life can make us much more shortsighted. As a result we settle for "values" that are much more immediate, and seemingly more important.

In trying to explain why the kingdom of heaven is the ultimate value, Jesus uses three images of the kingdom, the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in a field, and the dragnet, each adding its own distinct nuance to our pursuit of eternal life.

The merchant of fine pearls, with a great deal of experience in distinguishing merely good pearls from excellent ones, knew in an instant that the pearl in front of him was truly a perfect one. He sells everything that he owns to acquire this precious pearl. He had nothing of any value except this pearl. How was he to eat or have money for other essentials in life was apparently of no concern to him. Most likely, he had no intention of selling the pearl to recoup his expenses, because this pearl was so perfect he would never part with it. In our pursuit of the kingdom of heaven we have to be as single minded as that merchant, being willing to sacrifice everything we have and everything we are in order to acquire that "pearl" of great price.

The second image of the pursuit of the kingdom is a man who discovers a treasure buried in a field that belongs to someone else. He, too, sells all his possessions and uses subterfuge and deceit in order to buy the field and thus claim the treasure as his own. Today, he would probably be sued by the original owner for something akin to "inside trading." According to a Portuguese proverb, "God can write straight on crooked lines." Likewise, God uses even our sins and weaknesses to spur us on in our

pursuit of the kingdom, because through repentance and the sacrament of Reconciliation, we experience the compassion and mercy of God, who invites us to spend all of eternity with Him.

The parable of the dragnet reminds us that there are serious consequences in not striving for the kingdom of heaven with the determination of the merchant and the man who now owns the buried treasure. The fishermen cast their net far and wide, bringing in an enormous catch. And then they begin to sort, saving the good fish and throwing out the bad ones. Likewise, God casts the net of salvation far and wide, inviting everyone to the eternal banquet.' And just as those who don't RSVP to a dinner invitation lose their seat at the table, so must we RSVP to God's invitation to enter the kingdom. Our RSVP consists of pursuing the kingdom of heaven with the sacrifice of the merchant of fine pearls and the determination of the man who buys the field.

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