

Sunday, July 26, 2020

17th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

1st Reading: 1 Kings 3:5, 7-12

2nd Reading: Romans 8:28-30

Responsorial: Psalm 119:57, 72, 76-77, 127-130

Gospel: Matthew 13:44-52

Jesus Christ, the True Pearl of Great Price

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. (Matthew 13:45)

What are you looking for in life? Everybody is searching for something. Children long for a special toy or game. Teenagers look for a boyfriend or girlfriend or success at school. Working people might be seeking out the next big career opportunity. People of any age could be wanting financial security or peace of mind.

Today's Gospel introduces us to someone who is also a seeker: a merchant on a quest for fine pearls. Like many of us, this merchant is searching for something specific. And in the midst of his search, he finds something far more wonderful than what he expected: one single pearl of surpassing value, a "pearl of great price" (Matthew 13:46). Seeing it, he gives up the search for those "fine pearls." He commits himself fully to obtaining that one beautiful pearl—so much so that he sells everything else so that he can buy it.

Surely the merchant wasn't able to sell everything all at once. There were probably times when he doubted himself. But he kept at it, day after day, item after item, until he finally had it—the pearl of his dreams. At last he was content!

Jesus says this merchant shows us what the kingdom of heaven is like. It is made up of people like us, searching for happiness. In some ways, the things we seek *can* make us happy. But finding Jesus and being part of his kingdom far surpasses the happiness that anything else can give. In him we find the answer to our deepest longings for love and reconciliation. For security and fulfillment. For purpose and meaning.

Make no mistake: things we long for can often be good things. But remember the merchant. There was nothing wrong with the pearls he was trading in. Yet he sold all of them for that one pearl of great price.

"Lord, help me to see you as a priceless pearl worth everything in my life."

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Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. In the first reading, God offers Solomon the deal of a lifetime: *Ask something of me and I will give it to you.* Even though Solomon could have anything he wanted from God, he chose this request: *Give your servant, therefore, an understanding heart to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong.* The reading goes on to say that: *The LORD was pleased that Solomon made this request. ... I 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.*
 - What was it about Solomon's request to God's offer that made it so pleasing to Him?
 - How important to you is having an *understanding heart* and the ability to *distinguish right from wrong*? Why?
 - What additional steps can you take to allow your judgments and decisions to be guided more by the Holy Spirit than by your own likes and desires?
2. The responsorial psalm opens with these words: *I have said, O Lord, that my part is to keep your words. The law of your mouth is to me more precious than thousands of gold and silver pieces. Let your kindness comfort me according to your promise to your servants. Let your compassion come to me that I may live, for your law is my delight. For I love your commands more than gold, however fine. For in all your precepts I go forward; every false way I hate Wonderful are your decrees; therefore, I observe them.*
 - In these opening words, the psalmist uses these words almost interchangeably: *your words, your law, your commands, your precepts, and your decrees.* In what ways are they the same? In what ways are they different?
 - Why should we love the Lord's commands, even when they are often hard to keep?
 - What are the situations in your life that can make it difficult for you to follow the Lord's commands?
3. The second reading begins with these words: *We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.* The reading continues with these words: *For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters."*
 - What do the beginning words of the reading mean to you? Do you believe them?
 - Why is it easier to complain or rail against our difficult situations instead of counting on the Lord's love?
 - How do our difficult times or even our times of suffering help us to be *conformed to the image* of Jesus?
 - Can you share a difficult time when the Lord worked good for you despite your hurts, fears, or anxieties?
4. The Gospel reading opens with these words of Jesus: *The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea, which collects fish of every kind. When it is full they haul it ashore and sit down to put what is good into buckets. What is bad they throw away. Thus it will be at the end of the age.*
 - Though each one of these parables is quite different, what do they have in common with one another?
 - The kingdom of heaven is something that has so much greater value than any of the ones described in the Gospel reading. Why is this so?
 - How much of a *treasure* is your relationship with Jesus? What else can you do to deepen this relationship?
5. The meditation is a reflection on these words from the Gospel reading: *The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls* (Matthew 13:45). It ends with these words: "Finding Jesus and being part of his kingdom far surpasses the happiness that anything else can give. In him we find the answer to our deepest longings for love and reconciliation. For security and fulfillment. For purpose and meaning. Make no mistake: things we long for can often be good things. But remember the merchant. There was nothing wrong with the pearls he was trading in. Yet he sold all of them for that one pearl of great price."
 - What do these words from the meditation mean to you?
 - Do you believe that "Finding Jesus and being part of his kingdom far surpasses the happiness that anything else can give"? How easy, or hard, is it for you to follow these words? Why?
 - Are you willing to follow in the footsteps of the merchant who found "nothing wrong with the pearls he was trading in. Yet he sold all of them for that one pearl of great price"? Why or why not?

Take some time now to pray and ask the Lord for the grace to treasure your relationship with him, and to see him more deeply as the *pearl of great price*. Use the prayer below from the end of the meditation as the starting point.

"Lord, help me to see you as a priceless pearl worth everything in my life."

[The discussion questions were created by Maurice Blumberg, who is currently a member of the board of directors of the ChristLife Catholic Ministry for Evangelization (www.christlife.org), a member of the National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (www.nsc-chariscenter.org), and a board member of The Love of Christ Foundation. Prior to this, Maurice was the founding executive director of the National Fellowship of Catholic Men, a chairman of the board of *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org), and a director of partner relations for The Word Among Us Partners ministry. He can be contacted at mblumberg@wau.org or mblumberg@aol.com.]