



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, July 26, 2020
The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
1 Kings 3:5-12 and Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52
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Treasure that is new and old.

Q. What have the Sovereign's scepter with the cross and a torn bright red polyester bag have in common?

A. They both contain treasures.

The Sovereign's Scepter with the cross – part of the British Crown Jewels – contains the Cullinan 1 Diamond. The Cullinan Diamond was cut from the largest diamond ever mined in the world and forms the very heart of the Sovereign's scepter which is one of the most important pieces in the British Royal regalia. The torn bright red bag belonged to my daughter Rachel when she was seven years old and contains an assortment of items including some dog-eared playing cards, coloring pencils, a packet of fruit candy, and half the contents of the little wash bag you get on long-haul flights including the socks and that silly folding-toothbrush. But, like the Cullinan Diamond, when Rachel was seven, they were treasure to her and I know, if she had been given the choice at the time, which my daughter would have chosen if she was offered a chance for a swap by the Queen of England.

What are the things that we treasure? And what are the treasures that are buried deep within each one of us that God wants us truly to cherish? As Jesus said, *"Where your treasure is there will your heart be also."* (Matthew 6:21)

Over the past few weeks, our Gospel readings have been a series of parables about the Kingdom of God. In Matthew's Gospel, the writer uses the term 'Kingdom of heaven' as synonymous with Kingdom of God. Jesus was forming his disciples in his own way and revealing to them his knowledge of God's love and power; he was forming them in *his tradition*. In these parables, he opened their eyes to the presence of God and his Kingdom breaking into their world. In today's Gospel, we have five short parables of the Kingdom which speak of the activity of God in the world and the need to be diligent and observant as we search for that treasure. They are short and sharp – their message is clear, and I invite you to reflect on these five parables this week; see if one of them resonates with your own spiritual journey.

The Kingdom is like a mustard seed – the smallest of seeds – but one that, once germinated, can produce a great tree. The Kingdom of heaven is like yeast – also organic and living – yet secretly proving the dough and expanding it several times over in size. We should never underestimate God's power in using something we think is small and, seemingly, insignificant to bring about significant change.

The Kingdom of heaven is like treasure found in a field or like a merchant discovering a pearl of great price; it is often discovered in the most unexpected of places. But God's Kingdom is not like a commodity; it is beyond price. Also, it cannot remain hidden, like that treasure found in a field or the pearl that the merchant finally discovered, it has to be revealed and shared in order to make a difference.

Finally, the Kingdom of heaven is like a great net thrown into the sea – you simply do not know what you will catch! However, there is a twist in this final parable; indiscriminate fishing will bring surprises, and our *lives* will need to be sifted and sorted of all the dross and worthlessness that accumulates over time. The ocean is also, sadly, full of pollution – things that do not belong there – and our lives, like the ocean, like the life of the Christian Community, need to be examined in the cool light of day and not simply taken for granted.

In the middle of the third century, St Laurence – one of Pope Sixtus's deacons found his faith tested. The Pope and his deacons were killed by the Emperor Valerian and Laurence, as archdeacon, was asked to bring out the treasures of the Church. He assembled before the procurator the poor and the sick. "Here are the treasurers of the Church," he said. His life was like a parable of the Kingdom – and in revealing to the Roman procurator true treasure, he lost his mortal life and yet gained an everlasting crown in heaven.

Saint Thomas Church is a place where many people discover treasure. First, there is the building itself – an oasis of prayer in the heart of Manhattan; the glory of God represented through the craftsman's art. Then, there is the treasure of daily worship, pastoral care, making community, and formation in the Christian tradition. COVID-19 has not stopped all of that and I have been so delighted to see so many of our children and young people, and over 100 adults, regularly engaging in Christian formation and education. Then, of course, there is the great choral tradition that is at the heart of our church's liturgical life. How hard it has been these past four months to have been deprived of the beauty of holiness through the singing of our choir of men and boys.

Our mission is to worship, love and serve Our Lord Jesus Christ through the Anglican tradition and our unique choral heritage, and that tradition is being tested at the moment, as it is being tested in other parts of the Anglican World and notably in the great English Cathedrals with their own choirs silenced, and with the future of some of them hanging in the balance.

Tradition is important but, like the treasure I have just named, it is not as an end in itself; tradition is a living thing and, although this may sound like a contradiction, tradition is open to change and development.

Bishop Michael Marshall, old friend of this parish and of Nashotah House Theological Seminary used to warn against the love of **traditionalism** – loving tradition for its own sake. He would particularly delight in teasing Anglo-Catholics and reminding them that there was an important difference between tradition and *traditionalism*. He used to say this; "Tradition is the *living* faith of *dead* people; traditionalism is the *dead* faith of *living* people." Think about that for a moment: "Tradition is the living faith of dead people; traditionalism is the dead faith of living people."

This is something that Jesus was constantly challenging in those around him. He saw the Pharisees and the Scribes who studied the Law, who studied tradition, but who were only interested in the letter of the law. Not the liberation that the Law was meant to bring; not the community it was meant to foster; instead, they laid heavy burdens on people. That is why, just before we started hearing these parables, only a few weeks ago, Jesus invited his followers to take up *his yoke*. Like any other Rabbi, "Take my yoke and learn from me," said Jesus, "I will give rest to your souls for my yoke is easy and my burden light." (cf. Matthew 11:29)

All the things that many of us treasure here at Saint Thomas – the glory of the building; the beauty of its liturgy; the power of its choral tradition; the strength of its education and formation programs; the growing

sense of community and pastoral care – all these things are not an end in themselves, they are moments of encounter with the living God, active like yeast or growing secretly like the mustard seed; making a difference and helping us to grow and to change. Tradition is not static but on the move. It cannot be like treasure that we keep hidden in a field just for ourselves.

Many of you have told me your stories of how you stumbled across Saint Thomas Church or were introduced to it by a friend – yes, it is that treasure that was not left buried in a field, perhaps shared with you by someone, and that you now share with others and that draws you back time and time again. And the pearl of great price could very well be our Choir School and the formation of our young choristers. But I repeat, all of these things are not ends in themselves, but encounters with the living God who is alive and active and revealing himself in new and unexpected ways, yes even through this difficult and testing time.

If we treasure these things only for ourselves then, ironically, we may not actually value them truly as treasure. If we recognize that they are entrusted to us and to our community to make a difference to others and not just to ourselves, and to bring others to discover the presence of God in their lives, then they become treasures of the Kingdom of God, and God will bless them and help them flourish.

Think of our first reading today. When God appeared to Solomon, and offered him anything he asked for. Solomon could have asked for fame or wealth; for long life and prosperity; for military might or economic success. Instead, Solomon asked God for **wisdom** and the ability to discern between good and evil. He knew about true treasure.

“Have you understood all this?” said Jesus. They answered, “Yes.” And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

That is the challenge we face today, my friends. The challenge to be a scribe trained for the Kingdom rather than a scribe clinging to a past long gone. Yes, this Pandemic will change many things but that which we truly treasure – the glory of God in our midst – will bring us prosperity and a blessing. Our tradition is alive and growing, rooted in the apostolic faith of those who came before us, but discovering new ways of being the Church of Jesus Christ in this current age. And before I end this sermon, may I say on behalf of the vestry and my colleagues here, **thank you**. Thank you for the many messages of encouragement we have received these past four months. Thank you for the words that you have taken the time to write or to email to us. Thank you for continuing to make pledges to our ministry, to our music, to our choir school, even when our physical doors were shut. Thank you for the many one-off gifts that you have made, extra special gifts – sacrificial gifts. All of this proves to me that our tradition is very much alive, well, and treasured for the right reason.

This week, I invite you to reflect on what you treasure. Read this Gospel story again. Ask yourself what your treasure is, how you use it, and how you help it to grow.

Jesus said, *“Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”*