

17th Ordinary Sunday, July 30, 2017

It happened many years back in India. Some wealthy families in India used to bury the dead bodies of women with their gold ornaments on. A wealthy family in a village was following a casket to the cemetery. A man, who was known for stealing things in the town followed the group. He made sure that the body was a female body. He made sure where they buried the casket. The thief came late in the night to the cemetery when everything was dark and dug open the grave and pulled the casket out of the grave. He was very excited that he was going to get some gold. He broke open the casket only to find the body of a female dog inside. We see many around us, who take any amount of trouble to obtain the valuable things. Today's readings help us to know what is most valuable in our life.

Today's readings teach us that accepting Jesus as our God and Savior and sacrificing everything in life to do the will of God are the most precious things in the world. In our first reading, God appears to young king Solomon with a generous offer: "*Ask something of Me and I will give it to you.*" Solomon says, "*Give Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people and to distinguish right from wrong,*" Solomon is the son of King David. He was made king after his father David died. He was young and inexperienced and he had to lead the great nation of Israel. When God asked him to ask for something, he did not ask for riches, power or long life. He asked for an understanding heart so that he would be able to rule the people well, act compassionately and discern right from wrong. He selflessly asks for wisdom to understand his subjects' needs and to make skillful decisions in order to build a just society. For him the most valuable thing in life is not riches or power or long life. The most valuable thing for him is Wisdom to know God's will and lead his people according to God's will. He is a model and a challenge for us. His request here invites us to cultivate his prayer for a heart and mind that discerns for the will of God. Using the language, we find in today's parables, we could say that Solomon asked for a "treasure" or a "pearl of great price." And he got it. The reading teaches us that when we fulfill our duties as God would want us to do, we are then in His presence and on the threshold of the Kingdom.

The first two parables in today's Gospel – the parables of the buried treasure and the pearl – are lessons in the total *attachment* to Christ and *detachment* from the things of the world, which are demanded of the disciple. In the first parable a treasure hunter finds a treasure of great value in a field. Frequent battles and foreign invasions encouraged the people of Palestine to bury their treasures like money and jewelry in their fields. Sometimes unclaimed, forgotten and hidden treasures awaited some lucky finder. Jesus tells the story of one such lucky treasure-finder who sold everything he had in order to get ownership of the field. In the parable of the treasure in the field and in the parable of the merchant who sought fine pearls, we see the image of one who recognizes the value of the kingdom of God and gives up everything to possess it. Matthew, whose Gospel passage we heard today was a tax-collector before he followed Jesus. He might have experienced something like this when he discovered the eternal value of the Kingdom

preached by Jesus. When he discovered Jesus everything else became secondary. He left everything and followed Jesus.

The genuine disciples are those who give top priority to doing God's will. The "treasures" and "pearls" of lasting value are the things of God. They are the love of family and friends, the support of community, and the sense of fulfillment that rises from serving and giving for the sake of others. In order to attain such treasure, we must "sell off" our own interests, ambitions and agendas and thus free ourselves to embrace the lasting values of the compassion, love and mercy of God Who reconciles us to Himself.

We should live every moment in view of our precious goal. Most of the time, we are chasing false treasures such as money, social status or worldly pleasures. Thus, the really valuable pearl of sharing in God's life through Jesus here on earth and later in Heaven, is never found. Let us always remember that Heaven is within the reach of all of us who try to do the will of God. When we do so, we are already living in the Kingdom of Heaven while we are still on earth.