Reading St Giles, Baptism and Confirmation, 30 September 2014

In today’s gospel (Mt 13.47—52) we come to the last part of a long speech from Jesus. Standing in a boat offshore on the Sea of Galilee, he’s been addressing the crowds (as well as his disciples). Previously he’s given them rules of life, talked in principles. But now he’s using a new method: parables, stories or images drawn from every day life. His theme has been secrets, mysteries – things you wouldn’t know about if you were not taught; he talks about divine mysteries. Today we’ve heard his final short parable. But it’s been preceded by two of the shortest parables Jesus told – discovering the kingdom of heaven is like a labourer finding hidden treasure; like a merchant searching out pearls – and then the one we herd tonight … it’s like a trawlerman sorting out a net of fish.

In the first two of these there is a principle character: a hired farm labourer, and a wealthy jeweller. We are certainly meant to identify with them, but of course the real stars of the stories are the treasure and the pearl. Their discovery—one by accident, the other because it was being sought out—is the cause of each man’s reaction.

1 The labourer, who is probably not rich, unearths treasure in a farmer’s field by accident while he works; very shrewdly, he hides it immediately; then, full of excitement, he ‘sells everything he has in order to buy that field.’

2 The jeweller, an experienced trader on the look-out, is in search of fine pearls. Because he’s a skilled man he finds a pearl of great value, he ‘sells everything he has in order to buy that pearl.’

These men are different, they discover the kingdom differently: one is poor, the other is rich; one discovers by accident, the other discovers by searching. BUT—and this is decisive—both of them sell everything they own in order to seize their discovery. In them there is no regret; they do not make a sacrifice; they quickly make a deal!

That’s what the kingdom is like, says Jesus. You suddenly glimpse the kingdom of heaven, and realize that it’s worth more than everything you own. It’s what the poet TS Eliot called “the kingfisher's wing flashing light to light”, that passing glimpse of truth—the truth about yourself, the truth about God—that teaches you more than you have ever known before.

The measure of being a disciple of Jesus—becoming a saint, becoming the person God wants you to be and created you to be—is not your detachment from other things, but your attachment to Christ, your decision to keep your eyes fixed on him. He is the treasure, the precious pearl. As Paul says, “I count everything I’ve ever achieved as loss, because knowing Jesus as the Lord is worth far more than everything else put together.” (Phil 3.8).

When Jesus asked the disciples, “Have you understood all this?” he was trying to find out if they got the connection between the first two parables and the third, the sorting of the fish caught in the net. “If you’ve discovered hidden treasure, found the illusive pearl, and yet you do not sell everything to make it yours; if you do discover where wisdom is to be found, and decide you want to keep your options open … what sort of fish will you be in when it comes to sorting out the great dragnet? What condition will you be in? will you be among the fresh and living ones, or the dead and rotting ones?

So let us affirm once and for all our decision to be disciples of Christ, a response made with everything we have, with all we are, and all we will be. And may God who has begun in each one of us his work, his work of making us saints, bring it to fulfillment.