

June 8, 2003  
Sunday After Ascension

### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Two of the shortest parables in the gospels are those of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price. Two of the shortest parables in the gospels are those of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price. Probably because they are similar in structure and theme the New Testament preserves them in sequence: "Again the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:44-46). Common to both parables are the elements of discovery, value, sale, and purchase.

The latter three themes-value, sale, and purchase-are particularly strong in uniting these parables. The kingdom of heaven is portrayed as a reality of incomparable value, the attaining of which is worth more than everything else put together. Indeed, the sale of all that we have, in order to purchase this incomparable treasure, is a dominant Gospel motif quite apart from the parables. For example, Matthew somewhat later records our Lord's words to the rich young man: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (19:21).

Moreover, a comparison of this latter passage with the parable of the hidden treasure is very instructive. Indeed, I suggest that, in order to understand either account-the treasure in the field and the rich young man-it is useful to juxtapose them, because they manifestly deal with the identical moral situation. The dilemma of the rich young man, who wants to "have eternal life" (19:16), is indistinguishable from the opportunity of the man who finds the treasure buried in the field. The responses of the two men, however, are exactly opposite. In the case of the man in the parable, there is joy in his very despoiling: "for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has." However, in the case of the young man whom Jesus invites to make the identical decision, there is nothing but sadness: "But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (19:22). What for the one individual is a reason for joy is for the other

man an occasion of sorrow. The difference is entirely in their responses.

Comparing the two parables themselves—the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price—we discern that one of their common components, namely the element of "discovery," also provides a point of contrast between them. In the parable of the treasure in the field it is essential to the story that the treasure is \*hidden\*, concealed, not out in the open. Only one man discovers its whereabouts, and he proceeds to act on the information in the greatest secrecy. This is, after all, \*buried\* treasure, bearing an air of escapade, evoking a sense of adventure. This parable prompts us to crouch quietly under the full moon and listen. We hearken to the hooting of the owl. Frogs croak in the distant marsh, and crickets sing in the hedge. We hold our breath to hear the steady delving of the spade into the sod some three steps northeast of the shadow cast by the bottom branch of the sycamore tree. Buried treasure, you see, is the very stuff of romance, and the Lord's parable about it suggests that the Gospel embodies some secret allure for the searcher, some whispered mystery that beckons to the soul of the adventurer.

Just one verse later, however, when we come to the parable of the pearl, all this hushed atmosphere of mystery is changed. The kingdom no longer signifies the discovery of something secret but of something quite public. The pearl is not buried anywhere. On the contrary, it is exposed in the marketplace. It is out there where everyone can see it. This pearl of the kingdom becomes the subject of human assessment and calculation. People look at it, appraise it, compare it to other pearls. The kingdom thus becomes an historical component of human interest, activity, study, decision, and enterprise.

This pearl of great price may thus be likened to the star that beguiled the Magi; it was up there with all the other stars. In a sense, it even had to compete with those other stars in order to gain the interest and seal the allegiance of the wise. It was the attraction of this one star, this single pearl in the heavens, that fascinated their minds and drove them to the far reaches of their search. This was the star that whispered to their hearts: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell all that you have, and come, follow Me."

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**All Saints Orthodox Church  
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641  
Church Office: (773) 777-0749  
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**  
[phri@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phri@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)

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