

Sermon Preached at St Mary's Ballina
Matthew 13:44-58, Sunday 30 July 2023, 9th Sunday After Pentecost
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When you were getting dressed and ready for church this morning, I wonder, did you have to choose from amongst the 1000 pairs of shoes in your wardrobe? Or ladies, which handbag did you select from the 3000 handbags in your wardrobe? If you were Emelda Marcos, who really did have this many shoes and handbags in her wardrobe, it might have taken you a while to choose from such an extravagant spread.

While that sounds extravagant, it doesn't even compare with Kim Kardashian, who recently admitted to owning over 30,000 clothing items, most of which need to be housed in a special storage facility!

Apparently in the homes of the rich and famous, the wardrobe is where most extravagance is to be found.

Extravagance (according to my Oxford English Dictionary) is *excessive or unnecessary expense or outlay of money. Unrestrained or fantastic excess.*

For you and me, that sports car, that bigger than ever flat screen TV, that private school education or that overseas holiday might be seen as extravagant or not, depending on our means and our priorities.



Speaking personally my own collection of Rugby jerseys and club ties is modest in comparison to these celebrity wardrobes and I'm sure would be judged as almost essential, and not at all extravagant!

But all of us would agree that celebrity wardrobes certainly meet the definition of extravagance, especially when most of the world's population lives on less than \$5 a day and own only the essential items of clothing.

Today we see examples of extravagance in the gospel.

In the Parables about the Kingdom:

A treasure hidden in a field. Someone sells all he has to buy the field. Extravagance!

A merchant in search of fine pearls. He sells all he has to buy just one pearl. Extravagance.

These parables, together with the other parables occurring earlier in Chapter 13, are important teaching material from Jesus. They form the structural centre of the gospel of Matthew. The parables earlier in the Chapter have parallels in Mark and Luke but today's parables, from v44 onwards, are unique to Matthew. Unlike the parable of the sower and of the weeds and the wheat, they focus on the individual and their desire for the Kingdom

of God. In this sense they are more intimate and personal. The merchant and the person who buys the field are each driven by a strong desire – the pearl is captivating and the field must be purchased at all costs. The Kingdom is so precious that even the wise, prudent person would gladly give up everything to obtain it. The parables should make us stop and think: what do we desire? What is my reaction to the parable? Where am I in these parables?

The last two Sundays have offered agricultural parables, but there has been extravagance nevertheless. In the Parable of the Sower (Mt 13:1-23), the sower goes out to sow, he sows seed liberally, recklessly, generously, without a care for where it lands ... on stony ground, on a pathway, amongst thorns, or on good soil – he wants to spread the good news as far and wide as possible. Then with the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat – the confident farmer identifies the presence of weeds in the crop early, but he generously (even recklessly) allows good and bad to flourish together until the harvest (Mt 13:24-30).

Today I offer one of Dinah Roe Kendall's paintings for our reflection, *The Pearl of Great Price* (pictured). The merchant, having purchased this one pearl, caresses the pearl. He is surrounded by the rest of the family, and even some neighbours who have been invited to come and see it.

I love the woman in green who, although she wants to wave at everybody and tell them what is going on, can't take her eyes off the pearl.

Then there's the young man in red who has his arm around the merchant and is looking up at us. Are we to identify with him? The artist asks, is this Jesus, telling us the parable?

People are pouring in the door without hesitation – soon there'll be a queue. At the centre of it is the stillness of a small white circle.

They all look adoringly at the pearl, transfixed by its awesome beauty.

Where do you see yourself in this picture?

The merchant has a dream of beauty, quality, uniqueness. To possess this beauty he sets aside all the prudence that a careful merchant might normally exercise. The balanced portfolio goes out the door.

Jesus uses this merchant to teach us that likewise, God will do anything for the good, the true, the beautiful. That God will do anything it takes to honour the ones of his own



creating. Even you and me. You are this fine pearl held in God's hands and cherished in his heart.

Today's readings are full of this teaching.

In the Old Testament Jacob is captivated by Rachel (for him, a pearl of great price). No sacrifice to win her affection is too much to pay - not even seven years working for her father (the monster-in-law).

The Treasure Hidden in the Field. This speaks of the must-have desirability of the Kingdom. The person who comes across this treasure is so obsessed with it that he sells everything he has to buy the field. Recklessness! Blown to the four winds are prudence, caution and respectability.

So there is Good News in today's readings. Good News about God's reign. His Kingdom is greatly desirable and brings much joy to the believer. We are overwhelmed by God's gracious generosity, embarrassed by his interest in us. A passion for God's Kingdom is unsettling, it draws us out of our comfort zone. It can be a dangerous thing to be caught up in.

If you really love God and desire his Kingdom you might find yourself behaving like the merchant – writing a big cheque, surprising the family by doing something wonderful, surprising your parents by offering for the priesthood, nominating for Parish Council or some other ministry, or something else wonderfully extravagant!

The risks are endless for those who let the reign of God work its spell on them, like those in today's parable.

The Kingdom of God is like a merchant who went in search of fine pearls. We assume that as a merchant he had been searching for and dealing with fine pearls for much of his life. So what was so different about this one? What is this pearl, this thing that made such a difference, for you?

For priest and poet, George Herbert, the pearl is the "famous stone" – anything in our daily lives that can help us see God and help us serve him.

For Joseph Ratzinger (the late Pope Benedict) we are God's pearl of great price. For our sake, God spent everything he had – "he spent himself to the full". He wrote that "only God can understand that extravagance .. for God, only excess is sufficient".

As we gather around the table here today, we celebrate our greatest treasures, the good news of the risen Christ in Word and Sacrament, and of course each other. How do you and I show that extravagant love and service to God in return?

*O God, the fount of wisdom,
you have revealed to us in Christ
the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price:
grant us your Spirit's gift of discernment,
that, in the midst of the things of this world,
we may learn to value the priceless worth of your kingdom,
and be ready to renounce all else
for the sake of the precious gift you offer.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. **Amen.***