

Brechin Diocesan Synod 1 March 2014

Treasure Old and New: Bishop's Homily

[Ecclesiastes 1.1-18; Matthew 13.24-33, 44-52]

All is vanity and toil, what an unhappy business God gives us to attend to and how vexatious is wisdom.

It's tough being a royal philosopher. Synod members arriving here this morning perhaps appreciate how Ecclesiastes feels. The annual business agenda, well not a lot changes, and we have heard much like it before. But there are some interesting presentations and new people to meet. It would be good to leave here with a fresh idea or two and encouraged about the life our diocese.

Listen up, things are already transformed before our eyes says Jesus. The kingdom of heaven is found in wheat and weeds, in mustard seeds and leavening bread dough. The kingdom of heaven is hidden treasure and rare jewels and the fisherman's catch.

Matthew chapter 13 offers a unique insight into Jesus's teaching in parables. Parables of course have different levels of meaning. The kingdom of heaven is not just treasure - the object or the result. It is also the householder - the person and the process. Paradoxically it is probably the vision of synods and Church we aspire to, without quite believing that such a thing is possible.

Matthew, whose gospel we read this liturgical year, is the gospel of radical continuity and discontinuity, bringing and holding together the past and the present. Treasures old and new is Matthew's signature method for proclaiming the good news. In Jesus we meet the fulfilment of Jewish messianic hopes. As a consequence the early church found itself in tension with the synagogue. The values of the Christian kingdom grated with both a narrow adherence to Jewish Law and the subtleties of gentile philosophy.

As we today struggle to find our way with traditional Church, Fresh Expressions and an increasingly secular culture, Jesus's approach seems remarkably contemporary. In a pre-chemical agriculture weeds and wheat were better left together until harvest time. Similarly there is an inherent untidiness and precariousness about the state of Christian church life in Scotland just now. Our diocese is no exception.

The net full of different kinds of fish underlines the mixed fortunes of our toil and the knowledge based internet world we live in where sorting quality from quantity is important. Farmers and fishermen are of the kingdom because they use their rich experience and careful discernment to make the right choices optimising the result.

The mustard seed reminds us that from a tiny beginning big results are possible. Hope, patience and careful nurture sustain a project over a lifetime. The kingdom gardener is not merely the custodian of today's horticulture but plants for the next generation and a garden they will never see.

The yeast leavening the bread mix demonstrates the need for a key agent of change without which much hard work is wasted. The speed and effectiveness of seizing the moment is crucial.

And then there is the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price. In an era of popular archaeology and metal detectors the man who finds a hoard in a field strikes a chord with us. Likewise the gem specialist who after years of dealing comes across a particularly fine and rare pearl worthy of an appearance on the Antiques Roadshow.

As both searchers indicate in their response to their luck or judgement Jesus's parable teaches that the true cost of kingdom discipleship is selling up and staking everything on a single prize of great worth.

Like Matthew, the poet R S Thomas saw a real paradox or parable here and wrote that admission to the kingdom

Is free, if you will purge yourself

Of desire, and present yourself with

Your need only and the simple offering

Of your faith, green as a leaf.

Matthew's gospel is ultimately open-ended. We are left wondering what kind of disciples of the kingdom Jesus's resurrection friends will become. So too the choice is ours, to be gardeners and treasure seekers, and to be the harvest and the treasure we long for. To that end we pray that our Synod today will prove not to be vanity and vexation but a rather happy and productive busyness for God, bringing out treasures old and new.

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