

The Pearl of Great Price

Matthew 13v44-46: ⁴⁴“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. ⁴⁵“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls.⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

Collectors

Who here is a collector? What do you collect? I have known people who collect decorative spoons, tea-pots, miniature bottles of spirits, beer mats and of course world cup football stickers. When I was a boy, I collected stamps. My favourites were a collection of long horse & carriage stamps from Danzig. I not only collected stamps, but I got large stamp catalogues out of the local library and studied them. I knew what I was looking for and wanted. I particularly loved my British stamps, and had some lovely stamps from the sixties and seventies. I would however have quite happily given up my whole collection for one very small dull looking stamp with Queen Victoria's Head on it – the penny black. I had a stamp nearly as old, the penny lilac, but that was a very common stamp. The penny black is much rarer and is the UK's first ever stamp. To be the owner of a penny black would have been the ultimate for me back then. As a 10 year old boy, I would have shown everyone that came into my house the Penny Black if I had had one, whether they wanted to see it or not. I would have been that proud of it.

Today we are going to look at a parable about a merchant, a collector and seller of fine pearls. Some-one who was prepared to give up his whole collection, in fact everything he had, for one special Pearl. But why pearls? Of all the things you can collect or trade in, and even of all the gems-stones there are, why did Jesus choose to speak about pearls?

Fine Pearls

A pearl is made by a mollusc, such as an oyster. They lie on the sea bed and feed on plankton. But very occasionally whilst it is feeding a small intruder can lodge inside the soft inner layer of the oyster, causing it discomfort. It is unable to expel this foreign matter so it sets off its defence mechanism. It secretes a smooth hard crystalline structure called Nacre around the parasite. As long as the intruder remains within its body it will keep putting layer upon layer around it. After about 3 years the intruder is totally encased in a smooth cocoon a pearl. The oyster carries on doing this long after the pain is gone, so the pearl keeps growing. The structure is made up of millions of microscopic crystals each aligned perfectly so that light passing through one crystal is reflected and refracted by the next to produce some wonderful colours. Whilst scientists today can reproduce diamond, they have been unable to recreate a pearl outside of an oyster. In the wild, only one in 10,000 oysters are believed to have a pearl, which is why they are so expensive. So we harvest pearls, what we call 'cultured' pearls, from oysters by placing an irritant inside it, but they still have to wait for years for the oyster to make the pearl.

So the Oyster turns the offender or the irritant into something quite beautiful. Pearls come in various shapes, colours and sizes, the finest examples are worth a fortune. You could swap a 1" diameter wild grown pearl today for a small mansion. In the first century BC, just before Jesus was born, lived the Roman General Marc Antony and the Egyptian Pharaoh, Queen Cleopatra. To convince Rome that Egypt possessed a heritage and wealth that put it above conquest, Cleopatra wagered Marc Antony she could give the most expensive dinner in history. The Roman reclined as the queen sat with an empty plate and a goblet of wine. She crushed one large pearl of a pair of earrings, dissolved it in the liquid, then drank it down. Astonished, Antony declined his dinner -- the matching pearl -- and admitted she had won. Pliny the Elder, a contemporary of Jesus, was a Roman naturalist and historian. He writes in his famous Natural History that the two pearls of Cleopatra were worth an estimated 60 million sesterces, or 50 tons of the finest silver (the weight of 20 adult elephants, or a passenger jet).

So Pearls are special, and would have been the most expensive item that you could trade, in the time of Jesus, so to make his point most powerfully, he introduces via parable form, a merchant that trades in Pearls.

Parables & Metaphors

Parables were a well-established form of teaching in Jewish society. The word "parable" comes from a Greek compound word that refers to throwing something down beside something else. So a parable is a brief verbal illustration, often a metaphor, that is thrown down for the purpose of drawing a comparison. We should not over-complicate parables as there is often just a single truth that is being conveyed by the metaphor.

Modern day communicators say that if you can put your complicated message into a metaphor it will go straight into the sub-conscious mind, and it will be taken on board without a strong challenge from the conscious mind. The metaphor paints an easily remembered picture.

If you ask anyone over 40 in Britain to name a famous ski jumper, there is usually just one name they can think of? Despite the decades that have passed since the 1988 winter Olympics in Calgary Canada, it is Eddie the Eagle that everyone remembers. He was too heavy for the Sport, didn't have the right equipment, and was so far-sighted that he always wore glasses which fogged up so that he couldn't see where he was going. I've been up to the start point of the Calgary ski jump, and it is quite scary! He lived near me and was once seen hanging in a tree with his skis on. Somehow he survived Calgary, came last but set a British record, and was the only athlete singled out in the closing speech. No one remembers the competition winner, or even his real name Martin Edwards, but we all remember Eddie the Eagle – it's a great metaphor.

In the same way, parables easily lodge themselves in your minds whereas other bible passages might not. Most people will know the parable of the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan, whilst struggling to tell you what was in the Sermon on the mount! Here Jesus puts the picture of a giant beautiful Pearl into the minds of his listeners, his disciples.

8 parables – 3 audiences

In Matthew 13 we have a series of 8 parables, these were his first set of recorded parables, and was a new approach for Jesus. Up until now his teaching had been straight-forward words accompanied by miracles. So why start using parables? Now we see the start of the division, as the Pharisees had come to the conclusion that the teachings of Jesus originated from Satan, that he was speaking out words that came from the Devil. These formed one of his regular set of listeners, always trying to catch him out and bring Jesus down.

Jesus has been teaching parables from a boat just off the shore of Galilee. He has been speaking in parables to this his second set of listeners. The crowds that followed him, sometimes thousands of them from all over the country and beyond. It was to them that he was now speaking in picture language, aimed at relating in his understanding into everyday pictures and metaphors, such as fishing, farming and baking. From his boat where he could reach many ears, he told the parables of the Sower, the weeds, the Mustard Seed and the Yeast. Of these he explained just one to them, the parable of the Sower.

Then Jesus goes back the building he had made home for a while, in Capernaum, on the shores of Lake Galilee. Here he teaches his third audience, his ever-present disciples, who go home with him. They first ask him what the parable of the weeds was all about. Then he gives them 4 more parables just for his private audience. None of them are explained. He wants the pictures and the concepts they paint to go deep into their minds. It is up to the disciples then to dig deep into their deep understanding of scriptures, and of their intimate knowledge of Jesus to find an explanation for their own lives from this concept.

The Kingdom of God is like..

So Jesus tells three short parables that all start the same. The Kingdom of God is like. In the 2nd of 3 Jesus describes the kingdom of God is like a Pearl Merchant.

v45 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls.⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

The Merchant

His business and passion was pearls. He travelled far and wide looking for and pearls and reselling them. He is a wholesale dealer who travels to trade in pearls. He travels long distances and has discernment, he seeks the finest pearls. Jesus knew all about merchants, as the village of Nazareth where he was brought up was next to a trade route that linked Babylon [which was North East of Israel] to Egypt which was South West. The trade caravans may have even passed right by his house in Nazareth.

This merchant knew his business he was looking for good pearls to profit from. No doubt he already had a favourite pearl amongst his collection. Then one day, he sees it. He didn't even know such a pearl existed, but he found one that he recognised to be of immense value. The sight of it stirred up in him the desire. It must become his. Out of this desire, came a determination to own it. But how, because its value was so great. He did what he had to do, to make it his. He sold all his other pearls, and everything else he had, and the owner agreed to the huge sum of money. Finally, he had acquired this pearl of great value. Despite everything it cost him, such was the great value of the pearl, that to him it was still a wonderful bargain, and he was overjoyed by the deal.

The concept from the Pearl Merchant metaphor, here, is that when we are talking about the Kingdom of God, and our Christianity, there is some-one, or some-thing, or some things that are worth giving everything up for.

What does it mean?

So the picture of the pearl and the concept can lodge itself in our sub-conscious, and we accept it. However our conscious minds then want to know what it all means. So what or who is the Pearl supposed to represent in this parable? That's a very good question. What do you think? Jesus did not explain the parable, and after two millennia of study, meditation, and commentary, there seems to be a split opinion. The quick answer is often, Jesus of course, and there are many who would agree, including the great preacher Charles Spurgeon. They put forward very strong and persuasive arguments. However there are many fine and learned men and women who would argue No, Jesus can't be the Pearl, because we don't go and buy salvation, it's a free gift. Jesus comes looking for us, we the Church are the Pearl and he is the merchant. They too put forward very strong and persuasive arguments.

So I looked at the parables in Matthew 13 to find a logical progression, or some other clues. Was the God figure always the subject or the object of the parable? However it came across as a fairly random collection of metaphors. What on the surface had seemed to be a simple parable was becoming very difficult to understand. How could I teach a parable if I didn't know what Jesus had meant by it. Both arguments were equally convincing to me. So I decided to seek advice from a very learned bible teacher. His insight was brilliant. The parables are like photographs in an album.

The wedding album

I pondered on this, and thought of the Kingdom of God as a wedding, and the parables as separate photographs in the wedding album. One individual photograph does not give you a full understanding of the wedding, just one view of it. The individual photograph is a true representation, but only of a small part.

My daughter got married last year, and it was fun collating a digital album of on-line photos from different people on the day, seeing the wedding through their own lenses. But it did not really matter what order the photos were shown in because as a whole it gave you a good grasp on what the day was like. Of course it wasn't the wedding itself, just a pictorial representation, so only really a shadow or memory of the real experience. It did however give you a great insight into the splendour, the colours, the people, the emotions and the wonderful venues, and allowed you to imagine or relive the day.

Similarly, the parables do not have to run in a pattern, but each parable can be a separate window or windows to what the Kingdom of God is like. For us, what it means to be a Christian. In Matthew 13 the 8 parables cover a variety of themes, each one a window. Between them, they give a distinction between good from evil, show how we grow as Christians and what can prevent that. It looks at the high value of the kingdom, and the responsibility of telling others the Good News. Each parable is adding to the overall picture we have, but in different ways.

So the parable does not have to fit in with the others, but is thrown down as a comparison, telling me some important part of the overall picture of the Kingdom of God.

The Picture

Then after praying about it, I saw a picture in my mind. I pictured Jesus back in his room in Capernaum reclining on one side of a table, with the twelve disciples all reclining on the other side. The end of the table was up against a side wall, below a window through which sun-light was streaming. On the table, raised up a bit to eye-level was a wild pearl, the biggest pearl ever seen, over an inch in diameter, and it was directly in the sun-light.

What the disciples saw

I was also there, and I took my camera behind the disciples and took a photograph for the album. I saw what they saw. As they looked forward they could see something quite magnificent, not just reflecting the light, but almost as if the source of light itself. Something so precious and valuable, that they would not hesitate to give up jobs, families and all they owned if that is what it took to gain possession. The find of a life-time.

Then they also noticed the Pearl.

What the disciples saw first was Jesus. They realised the true value of Jesus, and there was a deep desire in them to accept his teaching and to follow him. They were determined to do this whatever the cost. They gave up everything for Him. Matthew left his profitable life in the tax business. Peter, James, John and Andrew abandoned their fishing boats. They all left homes and families behind. By making this sacrifice, they acquired more than they could have ever dreamt of. They were the Messiahs inner circle, they taught and healed like he did, they went on to be great church leaders, evangelists and missionaries of the Gospel. It was a great deal for them. Imagine if they could see this town today, and see all the Churches named after them.

They understood the importance and value of Jesus in their lives. But will we? Will we understand the great value of following Jesus. We must, because we have nothing of true value without Him. Everything we have is on loan from God, even our very breath.

When we start that relationship with God through Jesus, we are accepted into his Kingdom, we become adopted into his family, we become co-heirs with Christ. In other words we are princess and princesses of the Living God. Incredible, but that's what the bible says about us when we believe in Jesus.

If that's not enough, then we have His promise of the Holy Spirit to be with us every day, bringing the fruit of his Spirit into our lives, his love, joy, peace, patience, faithfulness, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control. This

in turn gives us a love and compassion for others. Where we once had mostly selfish thoughts, now we want to reach out in love and acceptance for those he places in front of us. We share his heart for the lost.

If that was not enough, we are promised the power and the authority of the Holy Spirit working in and through us not just to do the same things Jesus did, but even greater things. As we press in to a closer relationship with Him, these things are possible through the Holy Spirit. That's what Jesus said.

If that was not enough, we have the promise of eternal life as well, so that we can remain in relationship with Jesus and our Christian friends and family for ever and ever. It's a great deal.

Of great value indeed, but how do we pay for all of that. Isn't our salvation and eternal life a gift? Yes, there is nothing we can do, or say or pay that can earn us his love and eternal life. The bible says we have nothing we can give to God, we are but dirty rags. We need to accept his forgiveness and salvation freely. That is the truth. However we have to first get ourselves to a place in life where we are able to do that.

When we recognise Jesus exists, we need to desire him, and be determined enough to do whatever it takes to find that relationship with him, and be in a position where we shed those things that become a barrier to us accepting Jesus. Then we can acquire him as our own Lord and Saviour. That is the cost. It's not what we pay, it's what we get rid off. Self pride is one of them. The thought that you are a good person as it is, and doing okay, and you don't really need God. Also, some of our bad habits might have such a grip on us, that they become distractions from desiring Jesus in our lives. They can blind us towards Jesus. The Parable of the Rich Young Ruler is about that, a young man who thinks he can do it all it is his own strength, and earn his place in the Kingdom of God, his position and wealth has caused him to think like that. For him, he needed to rid himself of the wealth, in order to recognise he has nothing but what is loaned to him, and that his strength and wealth is in Christ alone.

Some people hear the Good News about Jesus, but are not prepared to give up their old life for him, no matter how bad or full of pain that old life is. Why? Because they have not understood the true value of Jesus to them. When we understand his true value, then we realise that even if we had to give up everything we owned to find that relationship with Jesus, then we would still have had a total bargain. No-one gives up their old life for Jesus, enters into his fullness, and then comes away thinking they have been short changed or had a bad deal.

There is absolutely nothing in all the world to compare to the magnificence of Jesus.

[He is some-one worth giving everything up for. Without doubt he is the Pearl of Great Price.](#)

What Jesus saw

I went back to my picture of the table in Jesus's home, with the huge pearl sitting on the table, at eye level with those reclining on either side, and the sun still streaming in through the window.

Then I moved and took my camera behind Jesus and took a photograph. Another one for the album. This time from my new angle, I could see what Jesus saw. As he looked forward he too could see something quite magnificent, beautifully reflecting the light. Something so precious and valuable to Him, that he was prepared to give up everything for, even his very life. He would not hesitate in trying to gain possession. This was the find of a life-time.

Then he also noticed the Pearl.

What Jesus saw first is his disciples, his follower, his Church. He saw you and me.

When he first saw his disciples, he could recognise their true value even though in some it was well hidden. He could see young men who he knew would open up their hearts to him, learn from him, and serve him faithfully to the end. Yes, he picked one that would not, and whose heart would betray him. That was necessary. But the others he recognised their true value and had a deep longing desire to be in relationship with them. His disciples, his followers, his church were going to be his intended hands and feet on earth.

Determined to have this relationship with them and with us, he gave up everything to secure that relationship. He gave up the comfort of heaven, and the security he had in that close relationship he had with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, and came to earth in bodily form. He gave up that for us, and came even though he may well have known where it would lead to, the pain and suffering on the cross

Having done what it took to acquire that relationship with them whilst on earth, Jesus loved his disciples so much, that he poured 3 years of his life into them, teaching and nurturing them, of equipping them for the future, promising them that through his Spirit he would never ever leave them. He poured his love into his disciples, into his followers, into his Church.

When a fire takes hold of a forest in which there are birds nesting their young, you find that the mother birds, stay in their nests sheltering their chicks with their wings from the heat of the fire, until the mothers die in position. Such is their love for their off-spring, that they would die trying to protect them rather than fly off, which they could easily do, and save themselves. If God puts such love in a tiny bird, how much more love has he himself for his own, for his followers, his Church. He not only loves us but has entrusted us to complete his mission.

This has always been his plan, he would not stay long in physical form, but his Church would finish off the work that he had begun, of uniting people under Gods love, bringing in Gods Kingdom. There was no Plan B. We are what he depends on, he trusts us to share the Good News until every tribe and nation know his name. He hands over his authority and his power to do that, and we are getting there. Estimated over 2 billion Christians with the numbers quadrupling over the last 100 years.

We are called to be the Salt of the Earth, to bring his flavour and stop the decay. We are called to be a light on the hill, to shine the Good News to other. The Church was even described as the Bride of Christ, such is his intimacy for the Church. It makes a great photograph for the album.

His disciples; his followers, his Church, were worth Jesus giving up everything for.
His Church (including this Church) without doubt is the Pearl of Great Price.

Your soul longs for him

And yet so many people today don't seek after God but our minds and bodies choose to seek after material wealth and possessions as both our ultimate goal and for our security. That is where most of us in the West place our value. But we hear of so many stories from those who have everything, power, fame and fortune, only to be left feeling empty or desolate. How can that be? It's because we do not understand the needs of our soul. Our soul does not thirst after wealth, it thirsts after God, that is how it is satisfied. As the Psalmist put it [Ps 24], As the deer pants for water, my soul thirsts after you God. If you have a dog who is thirsty on a hot day he has his tongue lolling out and pants away, desperate for a drink. St Augustine said that my soul is restless until it rests in you God. If he want to find true fulfilment in life, then we can only find it in Jesus. He is where the true value of life rests. That is why it is worth giving up everything to find him.

He longs for you.

Then in my picture when I thought I was done, unexpectedly Jesus turns round and grabs my camera from me. Then he takes my photograph, and with a smile says 'one for the album'. Of course, it is not just the Church as a body that Jesus came for, because he calls us individually. The relationship with Jesus is an individual choice.

The pearl diver goes deep into the darkness of the sea bed, and plucks the hidden oyster up into the light. In the same way Jesus reaches into the darkness and brings you into the light. You have your two shells firmly clamped together protecting your heart and your old ways. He will not force the shells apart, but he will wait for you to open them, and then he will come in and help. He will find the parasite, the Sin, where you are irritated and hurting. Just as the oyster coats some offending matter with its nacre to turn it into a beautiful pearl, so does Jesus take your hurts, and wraps you again and again, and again in his love until your fears and bitterness are gone, and you are transformed into something quite beautiful. Something with a very high price tag.

But how can you or I be of such great individual value, when we feel anything but valued by most people. In comparison to others, we might feel quite insignificant. **Our true value is not defined by what we bring to the table, or what others think of us but is defined by what Jesus is prepared to pay for us.** It is like anything big we sell, a car, a house. You can estimate a value, but its true value is the amount that some-one is prepared to pay for it.

During the 2014 world cup, my eldest lad and his friend were collecting world cup stickers of all the players. Anyone who has done this will know how difficult it is to complete the collection of 650 stickers even by swapping with friends. Most of the pupils and teachers were all avidly collecting and swapping. Then on the last day of the World cup, Miles just had one to get. He walked into a Year 9 tutor group at Registration, waving nearly 200 stickers, and said anyone that has got Hadrahovich of Bosnia, can have all these stickers for it. Everyone quickly checked their collections, and one delighted boy shouted out, he had it. At the start of the day, that sticker of the Bosnian player was just seemed to be worth one swap as were the other in his pack. But then in walked Miles, prepared to pay 200 stickers for that Bosnian player to complete his own set. The value had suddenly soared sky-high. For Miles, he still had a great deal. Did he later regret giving up all his swaps for one sticker - No not at all. When you have completed your collection, your swaps are of no consequence to you as you have nothing to swap them for. You have effectively lost nothing but gained the gem, the final card, the set is now complete, and you are absolutely delighted with your purchase, how ever many spares it cost you.

Jesus sacrificed his life for you. He purchased you with his blood. He made himself poor for your sake in order to make you rich by means of his poverty (2 Cor 8v9) Of his own free will he gave up everything he had to humbly die on a cross (Phil 2 v7-8). He did it for you, and would have done so if you had been the only person on earth. Your value is so high, because Jesus is prepared to pay such a high price for you.

It was a great price, it was a sacrificial price, he went willingly to the cross to die instead of me. He paid a spiritual price, he was separated from his Father for the first time – oh God why have you abandoned me. He had always lived in a Trinitarian relationship, one he enjoyed. But he paid the all-sufficient price. You only have to be a sinner, for Jesus to be interested in you, that means all of us.

Pearl derives from an old word which means pure. God is doing his work of purifying you, making you fit for his Church. Then just as the pearl reflects and refracts the light into marvellous colours, so you can reflect his light and bring new life and hope and marvel to a hurting world.

He is so proud of you. Just like a 10 year old stamp collector showing everyone that comes into the house his Penny Black whether or not the person understands its true value or thinks the stamps not up to much. In the same way Jesus is proud of you, of what he's purchased through his death, he loves you so much, he just wants to show you off. It does not matter that some others may look at you and think you're not up to much. It's Jesus that determines your value, it is through his eyes that you are evaluated, not the world's eyes. He says to any who listens – isn't he wonderful, isn't she beautiful, look at my lovely friend.

Its important today that you understand your true value in Christ, and start to understand how much he loves you. You will never fully grasp the extent of his love and compassion for you, or the value he places on you, but you can start by telling yourself, that Jesus loves me, Jesus loves me.

You are some-one that Jesus would give everything up for.
Without doubt **you** are the Pearl of Great Price. You are it.

Make sure that your photograph is in his wedding album

Amen.