

Reflection for the Seventeenth Sunday of the Church's Year

How would you answer the question: “*Ask, what I shall give you*”? It’s a question put by God to a very young Solomon who has just succeeded to his father David’s throne in very challenging circumstances. Wisdom is at the heart of today’s scriptures, the wisdom to know what is important. It would have been very tempting for Solomon to ask “*for the life of his enemies*” or “*long life*” for himself or even “*riches*” but he realised that such selfish requests were not worthy. He recognised that what he needed were the skills to govern God’s people worthily. He made his response to God, “*give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil.*” This request “*pleased the Lord*” and God gave him “*a wise and discerning mind*” like none before or since.

Wisdom features in today’s gospel too which puts before us two different scenarios, the lucky find and the long search. It would not be unusual in the world of Jesus to find treasure hidden in a field. The country had been overrun by invaders, sacked and pillaged for centuries. If people had a few valuables and had to flee in the face of a hostile invasion, they would bury their valuables in the earth in the hope of returning and reclaiming them one day. Often, they did not return and the treasures lay hidden for many years until accidentally discovered. This is the parable of the lucky find. On the other hand, the merchant has been on the long search and eventually, perhaps after many years, finds “*one pearl of great value.*”

Both these individuals have a heart wise enough and shrewd enough to appreciate what it is they have found. Both have a heart wise enough and shrewd enough to know that in order to possess the treasure they need to make a great sacrifice, to leave their old lives behind, and concentrate on their newly found wealth. In order to acquire his newly discovered treasure the man who makes the lucky find has to go off, sell everything he owns and buy the field, so that he might become the legitimate owner of the treasure. Similarly, the merchant on the long search also has to go off and sell everything in order to purchase the pearl of great value. Both must let go of their past; both must prioritise what is important.

Our gospel parables begin with the words, “*The kingdom of heaven is like...*”. They are intended to give us insight and guidance. They point us towards the importance of wisdom, of a discerning heart, of getting our priorities right, of action to live out our faith. Whether like Solomon in our first reading we have inherited our faith from our parents, or whether our faith is a lucky find, or whether we have come to it after a long search, it must become the most important thing in our lives.

So back to where we started. How would you answer God’s question: “*Ask, what I shall give you*”?