

26th July 2020 10 am The Great Treasure

Talk by Phil Swards, prayerful response by Val Whiteman

Transcript only of talk, including the reading, and the prayerful response

Talk (including reading of Matthew 13:44-46).....	1
Prayerful Response.....	3

Talk (including reading of Matthew 13:44-46)

[Julie Swards:]

So now Phil's going to bring God's Word to us. So I'll just pray for him as he speaks.

Father God, we thank You for our brother Phil, for the words that he is about to bring us this morning. We pray that every word he speaks will be from You. And that we will not only have ears to hear, but we will have minds to understand and hearts ready to receive and act on all that You have for us this morning. So bless him as he speaks, we pray, in Jesus' Name. Amen.

[Phil Swards:]

Thank you.

Very good morning to you, whether you are a regular member of the church family at St. John's church, whether you drop into the service occasionally or whether you've just simply found us on the internet this morning, you are all very welcome. Let's perhaps reflect on those words from Matthew's Gospel [Chapter 13].

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.

So what is this treasure? What is this pearl of great value? What is worth such a radical life change, such an investment? In these two parables that's represented by selling everything that the man or the merchant [does], and the answer is something that renders everything material as worthless by comparison and brings great joy as well as value. Matthew describes this as the Kingdom of Heaven, the other gospel writers describe it as the Kingdom of God. We might define it as acknowledging that God is sovereign in our life, and all that that entails. It's worth remembering that God is in control. He is the creator of the universe, and He designed the earth to be a place where mankind could be in relationship with Him, but mankind allowed sin to get in the way. Sin is anything that stops us from being in a proper relationship with God. It's part of our human nature. Paul tells us this in the letter to the Romans, chapter 3, verse 23,

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

But God didn't let it rest there. He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, into the world, fully human, yet fully God, to pay the price for our sin, to remove that barrier between us and God. And the price He paid was His death on the Cross. But as a result, He offers us a restored relationship with God that lasts, that starts now and lasts for eternity. If you like, that treasure, that great pearl

is an investment which pays out after we die in the form of eternal life. But it also pays out interest payments in this life too. And it's free. All we have to do is accept it. It's a bit like receiving a birthday present, freely offered to us by God through Jesus Christ. All we have to do is accept it and unwrap it. And it gives us that certainty that we are looking for. Now, evidence suggests that during the COVID-19 pandemic, more people have been looking to God and looking for God, looking for some certainty in an uncertain environment. Faced with an unseen peril, which could strike at any time, they're asking, "Is this all there is to life? When will my number be up? Is this the meaning of life?"

The Office for National Statistics reported at the end of June that 47% of people said their well-being had been negatively affected by the pandemic. 42% want to make a change to their work, 35% want to move home and perhaps sadly 38% want to move on from their existing relationship. Uncertainty indeed. A separate survey conducted for Tearfund reported that 24% of people in the UK have watched or listened to a church service since the start of lockdown, on the radio, on TV or the internet. 24% - nearly one in four! And again, of UK adults, 44% said they're praying. Of those, 56% agree that prayer can change the world, 5% of people say they started praying specifically during the lockdown and 18% have asked someone else to pray for them.

People turn to God in times of uncertainty. And uncertainty is a way in which God gets our attention. Now, some people who are looking will have had some sort of church background and something in their past, but perhaps they stopped going because their parents stopped going or their children stopped going or they moved house or some other form of circumstance happened. But there's something in there which is causing them to think about renewing their relationship with God. Some people might know exactly where this great treasure is, this pearl of great price, this relationship with God, but they don't know where to start looking for it. Some people may be looking for something but they don't know where to look, or are not even sure that that great treasure exists.

George Herbert (1593 to 1633), a great Christian poet-writer, all-rounder, clever chap, he wrote a poem called *The Pearl*, which is about the second of these two parables that we've had read to us this morning. And it describes his life and in the... er, it's quite a complex poem, but in the last stanza, he compares his life to a labyrinth, to a great maze and he compares his efforts to go through life on his own as his "grovelling wit". He couldn't do it on his own, but God led him through it, conducted him through it.

Perhaps if you've logged on to this service this morning, your life is a labyrinth, a bit of a maze with no clear path, no direction to get out of it. What if that's you, then what can you do about it? Well, first of all, you can make contact with us. After this talk, Val is going to lead us in a time of reflection and response. But you could make contact with us: you can email us, go onto the internet and Google St. John's Church Kenilworth and find the website [www.stjohn316.co.uk] where the details of phone numbers and you can contact Andrew, our vicar, or Denise, our parish administrator [at admin@stjohn316.co.uk]. So have a look at that.

You might also want to think about reading the Bible. If you've got one lying around the house, pick it up, have a look at it, or go online. On the internet, there are plenty of places. biblegateway.com is the one that I use. And there are plenty of different versions and translations of the Bible from which you can choose. And in your Bible, locate the Gospels in the New Testament, there are four of them and find Mark's gospel. Mark's is the shortest of the four gospels - 16 chapters, and it'll take you probably an hour or an hour and 15 minutes in one session to read that, so you can do that in an evening. Or you could read 15 minutes a day and easily get it done in an hour, hour and 15 minutes, but if you want to read it more slowly and more thoughtfully, perhaps an hour, an hour and a half. Read it through, and then go back to the end of chapter eight, about halfway through Mark's gospel [Mark 8:27-30]. And this is a

passage where Jesus is talking to His disciples at a place called Caesarea Philippi. And He says to his disciples, "Who do people say I am?". And his disciples say, "Well, some say you're John the baptist or Elijah or one of the one of the prophets." And Jesus says, "Who do *you* say I am? Who do you say *I* am?" And that's a question we all have to answer at one point or another in our lives.

And then you might want to flip to another part of the Bible and go to the book of Psalms. This is a book of songs of praise and prayers, written to God. And then there you'll find just about every sort of emotion that it is possible to go through. So plenty there to cater for all the difficulties of COVID-19. A friend of mine once called it the book of hand-gestures, because sometimes the psalmist is lifting his hands in prayer saying, gosh, "You're amazing, Lord God Almighty, You're fantastic!" Other times, he's saying, "Look at this brilliant world, isn't it great!" Other times he's saying, "Thank You, Lord, for all You've done for us." Now the time see saying, "Lord, please, please help me I am in real difficulties." Other times he's tearing his hair out saying, "How can You let these things happen? What's going on?" And sometimes, he's just sitting there saying, "Lord, I love You and You're in control." You might want to read a Psalm a day, just to see what God is saying to you and your life. Now - spoiler alert - when you get to psalm 119 you may want to divide it up. But generally speaking, try reading a psalm a day.

And then you might want to talk to somebody you know who is a Christian, find out what this is all about. Or you may even want to pray to God, to seek God in prayer. And we'll come on to that a little bit later on with what Val's going to say in our response reflections.

What about if you already have that pearl of great value in your life? What about if you already have that relationship with God? Well, you have good news to bring to people in these uncertain times. Now, I have been conducting my own sort of unofficial survey with people and, okay, a small sample size: 15, 20 or 25 people, but it seems to me there's more uncertainty for people coming out of lockdown than going into it. For a start, the virus is still out there. People are afraid for themselves, afraid for their friends or their family or their loved ones. People are anxious about jobs as the full impact economically of the pandemic starts to hit. People are worried about their jobs, people are worried about their savings. To a degree the lockdown has provided security: people have been within their own four walls. But now, when people have to start going out again, now there is a certain amount of social anxiety. For a start, every shop, every business seems to have their own rules and regulations for social distancing. Do you wear a face mask? When do you wear it? How close do you get? And that can be quite difficult.

So, what can we do? Well, we can offer to pray for people. Perhaps you could think about the 6, 8, 10 or 12 houses around you. And you could pop a little message to people saying, "You know I'm here. If you want a prayer about anything, I can do that." Drop a Psalm down on a piece of paper. Give it to them as a comfort in these times. Or you could invite people around to a party or a cup of coffee in your in your garden. Obviously, observing social distancing and numbers. But yeah, invite people around to something in your garden. Go onto the Kenilworth town website and find out which outlets and cafés are doing takeaway cream teas in the town, and invite someone to a cream tea. Or you can go for a walk with somebody. But take the opportunity to be a witness to the love of Jesus Christ.

The 19th century American evangelist, D.L. Moody said this: "Out of 100 men, one will read the Bible, the other 99 will read the Christian." Well, here's a chance for people to read us as Christians: here's a chance for us to show the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ to people in action in uncertain times. So pray about what God might be calling you to do to help others in this situation.

So I just want to finish with a short prayer for all of us at this time.

May God bless us with His light to lighten our path as we step into a future that is uncertain, except for the great pearl, the pearl of great value, the love of God, in Jesus Christ, and all that goes with it. Amen.

Prayerful Response

[Val Whiteman:]

Thank you, Phil, for your amazing words. There's so much in there that we have to think about that we can take into the week with us. As we respond, I'd like us to spend some time in quiet, thinking about the two areas that Phil mentioned. First of all, if you don't know Jesus, then Phil's question that Jesus asked of His disciples, "who do you say Jesus is?" If you don't know Him, then spend a moment starting to think about that: something that you can then take into the week. If you do know, then review, where is your treasure, and what do you think God wants you to do in the future? So let's spend a few moments, just now, having a quiet time thinking about what Phil has said.

[pause]

This is obviously just the beginning of thoughts. So take these thoughts away with you, spend some more quiet time before God, asking Him what it is He wants you to do.

Before I hand over to Denise I was reading this book which is called *The Resurrection in your Life* by Mike McKinley¹ that somebody lent me. And it takes the story of the Resurrection, and I've reached the Ascension just for today. And I was struck by one of the things that Mike McKinley said which was,

We might be tempted to make finances or success or family or our physical appearance the thing that controls our time and emotional state. But none of those things are worthy of our worship like Jesus. None of those things should be on the throne of our hearts. None of those things deserve to be seated next to the Majesty in heaven.

So the next time you're tempted to worship something else with your love and your life, remember that there is One who ascended to heaven. He is wearing the crown of the universe. Heaven revolves around Him; the earth revolves because of Him. If he will not be the center of your life and your affections, who or what will be? Are these things being worshiped right now by millions of angels? Have they been exalted by the Father? When you put it that way, they all look like sad and pathetic little substitutes for Jesus. We have only one King who is worthy of worship.

Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

[NIVUK unless otherwise stated] Extracts from the Holy Bible, New International Version Anglicised, copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 Biblica, formerly International Bible Society. Used under condition of copyright of Hodder & Stoughton Publishing, an Hachette UK company. All rights reserved. 'NIV' is a registered trademark of Biblica. UK trademark number 1448790

1 <https://www.thegoodbook.co.uk/the-resurrection-in-your-life>