



17th Sunday Ordinary Time (Year A)

Homily

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**Sunday 30 July 2023
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

When people first begin to study the Scriptures, they are taught that in order to truly understand the meaning of any text the first thing they have to do is make sure that they understand the original meaning and significance of the words that are used. For example, if we think of the story of the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine at Cana, it is important that we realise that the six stone water jars whose contents are turned into wine would represent, on a rough calculation, around 300 bottles of wine. Given that Jesus provides this wine when all the original supply has been exhausted, this would seem to be an excessive amount of wine. Indeed, from our modern point of view, it would be a foolhardy thing to do, because it would inevitably lead, if it was all consumed, to a high level of drunkenness. When we realise, however, that the author of Saint John's Gospel often speaks symbolically, we can appreciate the point being made: the gifts of God being offered through Jesus are far greater and richer than we could possibly imagine.

The second thing the student of the Scriptures would be taught, is that to truly understand a particular passage in the Gospels it is necessary to see it in its wider context. The story of the miracle at Cana seems to contain a rather difficult dialogue between Jesus and his mother. Mary becomes aware that the wine has run out. She goes to Jesus and asks him to do something about it, and his reply is, "Woman, what has that got to do with you or me?" This does not sound to our ears as a proper way for a son to speak to his mother. If we add to this the fact that Mary only appears twice in John's Gospel we might easily come to the conclusion that Mary should not, perhaps, be the significant figure in our faith that our Catholic tradition would suggest. If, however, we look more closely at the two events in which Mary does appear and we see them in the context of the whole gospel we realise that Mary is present and uniquely involved in the very first miracle which Jesus performs, just before he formally begins his public ministry, and that Mary is present again at what we might call the last miracle Jesus performs, the miracle of his total giving of himself for us in death on the cross which leads, of course, to the resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit. In Saint John's gospel, unlike in the other gospels, Mary plays a very significant part in the harrowing account of the death of her son. It is as if the presence of Mary, the mother of Jesus, book ends the whole ministry of her son. We can only understand the full significance of the ministry of Jesus if we understand the pivotal role which Mary plays.



The third thing a student of the Scriptures learns is that a full understanding of our faith only comes from placing each gospel in the context of the other three gospels, in the context of the other writings of the New Testament, and in the context of the developing faith of the Church. There is a profound unity in our faith, a deep interconnection between all elements of our faith, which it will probably take all of us a lifetime to fully understand.

What does all this have to do with the gospel to which we have listened this morning? In my own mind, it is an invitation to be both careful, but also excited, to discover exactly what Jesus means when he speaks about the kingdom of God. This is a phrase which occurs very often through all the Gospels. This morning we have heard three short parables about its meaning: the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field; like a merchant in search of fine pearls; and like a dragnet cast into the sea which pulls in all sorts of fish, both good and bad. These are just three among many other parables which Jesus uses to speak about the kingdom. Jesus teaches in this way, I believe, because he wants to invite us to make the effort to reach beyond the words to the meaning that lies within them.

This is the task which the Lord has given to his Church - to us. In doing so, he has promised to give the Church - to give us - the gift of his Holy Spirit who will lead the Church - lead us - into an ever deeper understanding of the truth.

This is exactly what the first Christian community, the earliest Church, did as it began its long journey through history, a journey which still continues today. The fruits of the earliest pondering of these mysteries of our faith, is found in the New Testament, especially in the writings of St Paul.

Saint Paul reflected often on what it means to speak of the kingdom of God. Much of that reflection comes together in his letter to the Romans. There he says quite simply, *"the Kingdom of God does not mean eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."* And then he immediately goes on to say, *"If you serve Christ in this way, you will please God and be respected by everyone"*. At one level Saint Paul was speaking about a particular controversy in his own day about whether or not Christians had to follow the laws of Judaism regarding what you could and could not eat. More fundamentally, however, Paul was trying to say that if we live through the gift of the Holy Spirit which we have been given, then the practical questions which trouble the Christian community, and which even sometimes cause great controversy, can only be resolved if we maintain the peace and joy which are the true characteristics of the disciples of Christ.

As is always the case so here, too, everything comes back to Christ. He is the treasure hidden in the field and the wise person will do whatever it takes to find that treasure. He is the fine pearl which the wise person will constantly go out and search for. And he is the fisherman who casts his net widely to catch as many fish as possible. In the end, perhaps some of those fish will have to be discarded but no one is excluded from the catch. Jesus wants to gather everybody to



himself. It is only when we are living in him that the joy, peace and righteousness of God's kingdom can prevail.

At the end of this morning's Gospel, Jesus asks his listeners, "*Have you understood all this?*" Perhaps he is asking us the same question. I suspect that for many of us the answer will be, "*I'm not sure if I have, but I want to and I'm going to keep trying*". If so, his promise to his first disciples can give us hope: *I will give you the Holy Spirit, and he will lead you into the fullness of the truth.* This promise was made by Jesus to his Church, and we are part of his Church. It is here, in the community of faith, that we will find the answer to all our yearnings.