

**Treasure**



Our daughter Naomi and her husband Joachim visited in February from Norway, where she lives. She brought her rumbunctious daughter Ellie, 2½, and noisy son, James, 6 months. At that time Ellie's favourite thing was a soft toy cat called 'Kattepus', (the Norwegian for pussy-cat). Unfortunately, in the scurry for the airport, Kattepus got left behind at our house. We posted it back, and I'd like you to see the video Naomi shot of her receiving it.

*(Apologies if you can't see the video. Imagine it!)*

It's quite heart-warming, isn't it? Naomi's treasure was Kattepus, and she simply loved him! Kattepus has now been displaced by 'Lamby', but that's how it goes when you're only little. I wonder what your treasure is?

I hope you like this picture. It's called 'Discovering a Treasure', painted by Kelly McNeil in 2011. I hope that most of us have had that experience of walking along a seashore and finding a treasure! Perhaps you have to be a child, or *become* a child to experience that level of excitement and joy.

What did you make of today's readings? What spoke to you? One of the short parables, from Matthew, perhaps? The mustard seed, the parable of the yeast, of the weeds, of the treasure hidden in a field, of the pearl merchant, or were you inspired by the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, *'if God is for us, who is against us?'* As I contemplated them, I felt myself drawn to these two short parables of Jesus: *'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it'* (Matthew 13:44-46). Can you imagine the unexpected surge of joy, when quite by chance, you find something of extraordinary value, or something precious you have lost? A bit like Ellie finding Kattepus? The man who found the treasure in the field speaks of finding that treasure when you're *not* looking for it, rather, you stumble on it, perhaps like finding a priceless work of art at a car boot sale you're meandering through; the parable of the pearl merchant speaks of finding something that you *were* looking for and you knew it when you found it – perhaps finding that priceless work of art when you *were* looking for it! Either way, you've found something so valuable that you must have it: and you give everything you have to get it. What would that be, for you?

Well, Jesus isn't talking about a priceless work of art, or indeed a treasure chest or a pearl, or Kattepus. Each of those is a symbol, a metaphor, they stand for something else: the Kingdom of Heaven. Treasure beyond price. What does the 'Kingdom of Heaven' even mean? (by the way, in the gospels, the 'Kingdom of God' means the same thing.) A lot is written about what the Kingdom of Heaven is, but here's one way of understanding it: it's about being connected, or reconnected with God; about knowing, and receiving who it is you are, who you really are: a beloved child of God. Someone known by God, loved by God, named by God, chosen. Wouldn't that be worth having? Wouldn't gaining that be treasure worth having, when you find it? And more, when we enter that place, that kingdom, when we know who we are in God, when we stand on that ground, we can begin to find the way to living and being differently, how to *be* that beloved child of God. Think of living by the Kingly Rule: where, as St Paul puts it, *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* are the order of the day (Galatians 5:22,23). Think of someone you know who embodies those virtues – isn't that treasure? It's also a kingdom where, as Paul again puts it, *'there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'* (Galatians 3:28). In other words, where there is equality between different races, people of different status, and people of different gender identity. Paul, and Jesus, were way ahead of their time! There's a theory that one of the reasons why Christianity took hold so rapidly in the Roman Empire, despite fierce opposition, was because society under the Empire was so violent, aggressive and status-driven, that when those qualities – love, joy, peace and so on - were actually lived out, people started thinking how much better that way of living was, so they embraced it. It was treasure. People literally gave their lives to have it.

I guess that I have a bit of a problem with these parables in this way: it looks like a transaction. I see something I want, I buy it, now it's mine. In fact, there's nothing we can do to *buy* the kingdom of God, to *buy* my way into His favour or love. We can only receive it, embrace it with joy. Coming to live as we are *meant* to live, *designed* to live. But it means not living just as we choose. There will be a change of heart, a change of direction, a choosing to live by the rules of the Kingdom. That is costly. There's a lovely quote from TS Eliot that captures this: '*A condition of complete simplicity, (Costing not less than everything)*'.<sup>1</sup>

Some of us will be able to look back to a point of time when we received or entered the kingdom of heaven, some of us can't, we simply grew up with it, and it may be that for some here it's still out there, not yet received. The parable is also a bit 'all or nothing'...but for many of us there's a kind of gradual process as the treasure of the kingdom slowly reveals itself to us, becomes more and more important, more and more precious, we give more and more of ourselves as the beauty and the loveliness of being in the kingdom forms in us. I suspect that many of us fall into that category. And it may be that again and again in our lives we will rediscover the treasure, trip over it by accident, and be amazed all over again at what we have found.

But I'm starting to see this short parable from another perspective. Up until now, I have taken the person finding the treasure, or the pearl merchant in search of the finest pearl in the parables to be you or me, finding the treasure and giving everything for it. But I wonder, can we see the someone who finds treasure in a field, or the pearl merchant who goes out looking for the finest pearl, to perhaps be someone else? Perhaps to be God? Who goes out into a field, the earth, and finds some treasure He gives everything for: what could that be? Might it be you or me? Might it be that you or I are treasure to God? Could that be true? But this is exactly what God has done. We know the story. It begins with Christmas, with the incarnating, the embodying, the personifying of God in a human being, the giving up of all His glory and power, the emptying of Himself (what is called the *kenosis*, Philippians 2:6-8). The story goes on, the man becomes a preacher and healer, walking across a small country in the Near East, yes, across fields and in marketplaces - and finding a few men and women who dared to follow him. Were they treasure to Him? Well, He was prepared to give up everything for their sakes. There's a lovely verse in one of Paul's letters that captures this: '*For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich*' (2 Corinthians 8:9). Can we let this thought, this truth, this treasure in? Not only that the kingdom of heaven is like priceless treasure, but that *we ourselves are priceless treasure*?

Before I end, I want to throw something else in briefly. See what you make of this. Thinking back to Ellie and Kattopus, of course Ellie's joy at finding her toy was that she had *lost* it and *found* it. Kattopus was already precious to Ellie, and then she lost him. She recognised him instantly when she got him back and was overjoyed. I wonder if there is something there? In the first pages of the bible, we find the creation story, and the description of the garden peopled by the two first humans and the wonderful intimacy they had with God, '*walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze*' (Genesis 3:8) – just before it all went horribly wrong and God exiled them from the garden. Well, although I don't take those chapters of the bible as literal, historical truth: I understand them to be more like a parable, and I do take them to be profoundly true in what they tell us about God and humanity. Those chapters are deeply symbolic. They tell us, among other things, that God intends us to be in close relationship with Him, and that just as Adam and Eve would have carried the memory of God walking in the garden with them after God banished them from the garden, so we all carry within us, at some deep, mysterious, unconscious level of the soul, the memory or the sense of that. And Adam and Eve stand for all of us. Which means, that when we find that again, that treasure, that knowledge, God, *we recognise it*. As Augustine put it, '*O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you*'<sup>2</sup>

When I sat down to prepare today's sermon, I had to choose whether to use the gospel text with these two parables in it – which I did, of course – or the reading from St Paul in Romans 8. And Romans chapter 8 is a wonderful page in the Bible! But in fact Paul is telling the same message. '*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,*<sup>39</sup> *nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*' Is that not treasure indeed? Do you have that treasure? Do you know that *you are* treasure?

Richard Croft

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<sup>1</sup> TS Eliot, *The Four Quartets*

<sup>2</sup> St Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*