

THE COST OF THAT WHICH IS PRICELESS

Mt 13.44-46

It is said that Cleopatra once made a bet with Mark Anthony about who could eat the most expensive meal. Mark Anthony ordered the costliest delicacies that could possibly be found; he then ate so much that we was sure that a woman could never keep up. Cleopatra found a simpler solution – she took of her incredibly expensive pearl earrings, dissolved them in vinegar, and then drank the cup. Victory was hers.

There is a similar story of an English aristocrat who argued with a Spanish diplomat about who was willing to raise a toast to his queen, using the world's most expensive wine. The Englishman took the most famous pearl from his collection, a pearl which at the time was said to have cost the incredible amount of 15 000 pounds sterling, and ground the pearl up before putting it in the glass of wine.

The merchant from today's parable would clearly not have understood these people. They used their priceless pearl in order to reach some goal – to win a bet, to strike others imagination. For the merchant the priceless pearl had become the goal itself, the only goal for which he would be willing to sacrifice all else. Those fabulously rich people could afford to act in such a way with unique jewelry, since their wealth and their position in society did not really decrease with such an act. For them it was no more than a gesture, even if a significant one, and no more than a game, even if an expensive one. The situation was completely different for the merchant. The parable says it clearly – in order for him to obtain the pearl, he had to sell everything!

I wonder, was he married? Did he have children? Elderly parents? And did they live, depending only on him, the merchant, for their sustenance? If so, then what did they say about this little purchase that left them immediately destitute? That destitution might have been temporary, if the merchant bought the pearl in order to sell it at a profit later; on the other hand, they might have even fallen into permanent destitution if the merchant was enchanted by the pearl's beauty such that he simply had to possess it. In either case, to sell everything you have – that's something more than drastic. To lose one's comfortable home, the land on which your parents lived and worked, the familiar things you owned, the slaves you worked so hard to train...all of this knowing that it is possible that, even if you get rich again, you might not be able to buy it all back.

I remember stories of people who lived through the 900 day blockade of Leningrad during the Second World War. During that time, people would sell anything just for the sake of a crumb of bread; yet, somehow, some were able to save their family's valuables and jewels.

I think about those elderly people who live in communal apartments on Nevskii Prospekt, with its dust, noise and dirty air. Some of them refuse to move to new, comfortable apartments in new neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city – despite those trying to talk them into moving, the threat from potential buyers of the apartment, relatives' begging... The merchant from the parable is very like these people. For the sake of their “pearl” they are willing to sacrifice all else.

And so what would the merchant's wife and children say about this deal? Maybe they didn't have a chance to say anything. Maybe he sold them as well. That sort of thing happened back then.... And all for the sake of a pearl.

And Jesus compares such a pearl with the Heavenly Kingdom...

I will not try to overly dramatize the situation by intentionally thinking up things to make it worse. That work, you could say, has already been done for me.

Remember Luther's “A Mighty Fortress.” It's the most famous Lutheran hymn; in a way, it's become the “national anthem” of the Lutheran church. It's been translated into many languages including, of course, into Russian. We sing one of these translations frequently in our services. At one time I studied a number of Russian translations of the hymn – there are dozens. And here's what I found – in all or almost all of them, the 4th line of the final verse has been purposefully distorted. And that's understandable. No one in his right mind would write what Luther wrote; no one would repeat his famous «Laß fahren dahin!». This expression, translated in the LWB as “were they to take...” can be translated approximately as “let me them take,” or “well, let it be that they take....!”

What is Luther talking about? A pastor once recalled an incident that he witnessed. “At the funeral of an elderly pastor, the pastor's favorite hymn, Luther's 'A Mighty Fortress,' was played. A young man was standing next to me. We sang the song loudly together with everyone else. But he quickly became silent at the last line. He could not honestly say 'Were they to take our house / Goods, honor, child or spouse / Though life be wrenched away' but, at the end, he joined in again 'They cannot win the day/ The Kingdom's ours forever.’”

Yes, this is exactly what Luther says in his famous song. All that you have, your honor and reputation, your children and wife, none of that counts for anything when compared to the Heavenly Kingdom!

The Heavenly Kingdom – that most valuable of pearls – costs so much that even all earth's treasures would not be enough for you to pay for it. We know that, in the end, money and valuables are not of primary importance. There are things that are really important – love, friendship, family, a good name, children, loved ones. And here's the thing – even these truly valuables are nothing when compared to the Kingdom of Heaven. Love, friends, family, a good name, children, loved ones -

Laß fahren dahin! Let them all be taken away!

Does it sound harsh, even wild? Well, the Heavenly Kingdom, faith, a relationship with God – they aren't games, even if expensive and wasteful ones like in those legendary tricks with the pearls. I can say it even more directly – from the moment when you decided to be in relationship with God, from that moment on all games came to an end. Now everything is serious, truly serious, even, as they say, deathly serious!

And so what is the Heavenly Kingdom? As a rule these words are used to talk about paradise, a blessed state after death, a sort of garden where the souls of the righteous stroll around as pleasant music plays in the background. Of course such a picture is too naïve, primitive even. The Heavenly Kingdom – this is something else and, of course, it is not something that starts only after death. The Heavenly Kingdom, this is a Kingdom which we, perhaps, do not see, but in which we are really living right now. The Heavenly Kingdom is the reality of God's forgiveness and mercy that we have been included in on. It is God's “Yes” spoken to us once and forever. It is the recognition that we have been found by God in Jesus Christ, have been accepted by Him and we will never be lost, no matter what happens to us, no matter how we act.

We live in this Heavenly Kingdom. We, if we stick to the images used in today's parable by Jesus, are possessed by it.

I've just spoken a few words that might sound, in their own way, beautiful, but on the other hand abstract and banal – forgiveness, love, mercy, God's “Yes” etc. It's at this point that every Lutheran who regularly attends worship services should begin to fall asleep. Everything is good, right and wonderful. But are these things that we truly value? As valuable as the pearl was for the the

merchant? As valuable as the Kingdom was for Luther in his hymn? It seems that our mouths are resisting, are not letting us say that affirming “yes”...

And so, how valuable is the kingdom, really? We've just said that it is more valuable than even the best and most valuable things in this life, that they are nothing when compared with this pearl. These words need to be understood in the correct way. Many Christian preachers say similar things.

However, as a rule, this is understood, more or less in the following way – the love that we give to the things that are valuable in our life we should now give to God and His Kingdom. This sort of preaching tries to reduce the valuable things in this world in order to show a great contrast with the value of the Divine.

But such an approach is misanthropic and godless! Everything is different, just the opposite, even. No one demands of us, and no one could possibly demand of us, that we value God's great gifts other than those we know here on earth – our friends, love, children, health. This is all very valuable, even, probably, endlessly valuable! But the Kingdom of Heaven is even more so! In order to show its true value it is not necessary to reduce earthly goodness or joys, but instead just the opposite should be done – their value should be emphasized.

It is true, the essence of the Kingdom of Heaven, the essence of the Divine is very hard to put into human words. It is practically inescapable that we will drift into abstract understandings and banalities – eternal love, the forgiveness of sins, grace, etc.

However we will try to go about it in a different way, we will try to measure the value of the Heavenly Kingdom in more concrete things, in those very good and wonderful things that we hold so dear.

As one advertisement says “there are some things in life that money can't buy.” The blowing of a cool breeze on a hot day. The careless laughter of one's grandchildren. The caresses of a loved one. The smell of lumber as you build your own house. A glass of rich, velvety sweet wine...

The Kingdom of Heaven is more wonderful, more amazing than all that taken together! This is what is hidden behind such boring “church words” as grace, love, and forgiveness of sins! Something wonderful and indescribable, inexplicable and yet attractive!

Note that Jesus Himself does not use any of these church words. He, as in His parable, speaks about the Kingdom of Heaven as a priceless treasure and a wonderful pearl.

We cannot directly observe the Heavenly Kingdom and its gifts insofar as they go beyond the limits of our five sense organs. However, we can observe those good things that God has give us in this world and see in them a shimmering of the eternal, Divine Kingdom. Therefore it is better not to speak of the Kingdom of Heaven in the same way as textbooks on theology do, using words like “redemption,” “grace,” “eternity.” Instead it is better to say: “The Kingdom of Heaven is that which is better than a drink of cold water after a long walk under the hot sun. The Kingdom of Heaven is more exciting than your first kiss. The Kingdom of Heaven is that which is more gentle than the warm water of the south sea.” These sort of definitions will be a lot more exact than “church words”!

However there is still one more aspect of all of this which we still have to speak about. If we had to purchase the Kingdom of Heaven, then we would have to pay for it with all of those things which are priceless to us, that which we hold most dear. And it is not clear that would we have the means...

It is a wonderful thing to describe the Kingdom of Heaven, comparing it with the most wonderful things we know on the earth. It's really true!

But, all the same, remember, too, Luther's «Laß fahren dahin!»? If we want to understand what the Kingdom of Heaven really is, then we should be ready to repeat these scary words, too. Yes, we must acknowledge it openly – they are scary. But not because the Kingdom of Heaven is itself scary because it demands such sacrifice from us. No. Luther did not call everyone to give up all for the sake of the Heavenly Kingdom. With his song he addressed those people who had lost it all or who might lose it all, not of their own will but as the result of repression, persecution, war or other troubles. His words are words of comfort. He is saying “you have a treasure which no one can take from you and which is infinitely greater still than all those other dear and wonderful things.”

Therefore in search for ways to describe the Heavenly Kingdom we might reflect upon not only the best and not only the scariest things in this world. And therefore we can continue our thoughts about “definitions” of the Kingdom of Heaven and say: “The Kingdom of Heaven is that which remains with you when you are dying of hunger or thirst. The Kingdom of Heaven is that which stays with you even when your those who love you most betray you. The Kingdom of Heaven is that which is with you in the longest and most difficult illness.”

No, we do not have to sacrifice anything for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. We do not have to pay anything for it. Jesus Christ has already attained it for us. He has paid for it through His

suffering and death. This price was enough, and we ourselves cannot add anything to it. However, just as the merchant from the parable was struck by the pearl and was mesmerized by it, we, too, can be mesmerized by the Heavenly Kingdom and meditate upon it. For what other reason would it be necessary to us, this precious jewel! Of course we cannot look upon it directly, but its reflections can be made known to us, both in the wonderful and even in the scary things and events of our lives. The Kingdom of Heaven is the reality of love, forgiveness, and grace of God – for us even to look upon it from afar, it is worth it to live through moments of happiness and also to experience its pain...