Prego Plus: Background Notes

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

First Reading 1 Kings 3: 5-6a, 7–12

Biblical scholars think that the two books which we know as 1 Kings and 2 Kings were originally a single item. They build on the history of the monarchy that starts in the books of Samuel. 1 Kings begins with the reign of Solomon. He was not the heir apparent. The kingship should have gone to the eldest living son Adonijah, but Nathan and Bathsheba convinced the dying David to name Solomon as his heir.

This week's passage focuses on Solomon's dream in Gibeon, the seat of an ancient sanctuary called 'the great high place', located 5miles NW of Jerusalem. Now represented by the modern village el-Jib, Gibeon became a priest-city and was probably the main shrine for Israel's worship before the building of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Revelations by dreams are a fairly common device in the Bible (see for example Genesis 20: 3, when God visits Abimelech in a dream; or Matthew 2: 12, when the Magi were warned in a dream not to go back to see Herod).

At the time, the expected answer to God's question *'Ask what shall I give you?*' would have focused on large, imposing monuments with inscriptions to the King's glory, and luxury goods.

Instead, Solomon's prayer focuses on three things: the past: his faithfulness to God following the example of his father King David; the present: his feelings of inadequacy as a good leader; and the future, where he seeks an *'understanding mind*' .

God praises him and grants his request for discernment and wisdom. This will be put to the test in the famous episode of the judgement of Solomon (1 Kings 3: 16–28).

The wisdom to make the right decision when the people appeal to Solomon shows us the nature of Kingship under God's guidance, and the duties of a King of the Davidic line.

Gospel Matthew 13: 44–52

For the third consecutive week we focus on parables from Matthew 13. (For more about their purpose and meaning, see the Prego Plus for Sunday 15 OTA.) Today's Prego leaflet gives just the first two parables, though there are four in the passage as a whole. All four are only found in Matthew, who is now addressing just the disciples, not the crowd. Each one tries to give us an idea of the kingdom of heaven, and each one to some extent also involves searching, finding, rejoicing and selling everything.

Treasure hidden in a field

At a time when banks did not exist, it was common practice for people to bury part of their fortune in the hope of protecting it from thieves and brigands. In the Parable of the Talents, the third servant buries his talent (Matthew 25: 18). Archaeological digs to this day still occasionally come across such hoards.

The concept of treasure occurs several times in Matthew's Gospel: see 6: 19–21: 'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth' or 19: 21: 'Sell what you own … 'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also '.

A merchant looking for fine pearls

Pearls had great value at the time and were sometimes worth more than gold. In both of these parables, the people take risks and sell all that they have to attain a greater reward. It could be seen as a way of describing the cost of discipleship.

A dragnet cast into the sea

In the next two parables, the scene moves from agriculture and trade to fishing: a setting familiar to the disciples. As in last week's Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, the kingdom of heaven includes 'every kind', good and bad. The reference to good fish and those that are 'no use' may also refer to Jewish strict dietary laws. In a similar way, the kingdom of heaven is a mixed body of saints and sinners. The final sorting out can be left to God and his angels at the end of time.

Every scribe who becomes a disciple

Some Christian converts may have been scribes: indeed some see in this phrase a self-description of Matthew.

Things both old and new

The 'old' would be the Law and the Prophets; the 'new' the Gospels, Jesus's teachings. Both are equally needed, as the Gospels are the fulfilment of the Law.

St Beuno's Outreach
in the Diocese of Wrexham