

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost. July 30. Our greatest treasure.

There is a story which is told about a holy man in Turkey. He was summoned to the Topkapi Palace, to the court of the Sultan in Istanbul. There he gave such profound advice that the Sultan's life was transformed. As a sign of his gratitude the Sultan presented the holy man with an enormous, flawless diamond from his treasure store. The attendants to the Sultan were amazed but the holy man didn't seem overly awed. He just tucked it into his bag and continued on his way.

One of the attendants sent a message to his brother Achmed, who lived in a small village a few day's journey from the city. Achmed waited and watched as the holy man moved through the village, greeting people and smiling and then (as was his custom) went to the outskirts where he set up a simple camp and slept alongside a small fire. In the middle of the night Achmed crept up on the holy man and ordered him to hand over his greatest treasure. At first the holy man was startled, confused and then, reaching into his bag he pulled out the massive diamond. "Is this trinket what you want?" Achmed grabbed the diamond and rushed back to his home and spent the rest of the night staring at the diamond.

In the morning though Achmed left the diamond on his table, left his front door open and went running down the road to where he found the holy man walking towards the next village. Achmed fell at his feet and said "Please, please. Now give me what you have that is so valuable that you could so easily give away that great treasure!"

What is the most valuable thing you possess? I bundled and packed and wrapped up all my bits and pieces and carted them up here by road from Adelaide. As I have been unpacking it has been clear to me that the value to me of the things I have bears little relationship to their monetary value. It is more what they mean to me. In the photo on the front of the order of service for the commissioning yesterday you may have seen my bear, Sophocles. In dollar value he isn't worth anything really, but to me he is priceless. Someday I will tell you more of Sophocles.

What do you have in your life which is incredibly valuable to you? There is that question often asked in group training exercises "Your house is burning. You have less than one minute to escape. What do you save and take with you?" Most people say family and pets. If there is time there will be other things. Photos, especially those which are not in the digital cloud. Those might be the things we would try to save. What do you value most?

It is a hard question. It's difficulty is a first world question too. We are surrounded by so many things. It could be shocking to even try to work out among all the things we possess what we might try to save and how we would feel if we lost all of that. It does happen. Floods, as happened here even in Toowoomba, can sweep everything away. Fire and other disasters can take away all the possessions in an instant. I have friends in and from Africa who have had to flee for their lives without anything but the clothes on their backs. It is humbling to meet people who hold onto joy even after losing every possession. Some of those stories I will also share with you as we go on together.

Saint Paul wrote about losing everything. He was a successful man. He had a business. He had respect. He had position. He was charged with a lot of responsibility as what we might call the grand inquisitor seeking out and punishing pesky followers of Jesus on behalf of the religious establishment in Jerusalem. That was when his name was Saul. Then on the road to Damascus all that stopped. His life was turned upside down. He found new direction, new purpose, new life. Later, writing to the Christians in the town of Philippi (part of modern Greece) Paul wrote "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8)

He was saying I count everything I possess, all the family connections, all the honour I deserve, all the wealth I may have, even all the knowledge I have accumulated, I count all that as 'loss' compared to knowing Jesus Christ. The word translated so gently for us as 'loss' means faeces. His statement was 'THAT' strong! He was saying that everything else meant nothing to him. Compared with knowing Jesus.

As I am sure you know Paul and other biblical writers, and even some preachers, use dramatic big picture dramatic exaggerations to make a point, to get an impact, to get us to think. In a way that was what Paul was doing. But he was also serious. Knowing Jesus Christ, having that relationship, defined who he was and defined his life.

Last Sunday I went to St James' here in Toowoomba. It happened that I was there for a service when two young women were being confirmed. That is such a powerful moment! When adults make that statement and connection and declare that here is someone who brings life together. I know that Ben made that same wonderful and significant step here recently at St Luke's. Next year when we are planning towards a confirmation I want us to think about reaffirmation, for those like me who were confirmed as 12 year olds or a similar young age there can come a time when we want to stand up again and say YES this relationship shapes me and who I am and I want to own and affirm and celebrate that, and I want others to share the joy.

What we have in this relationship is the key to our lives. We might also be blessed with many other things. As individuals and as communities. Wealth and material possessions. Houses, buildings, all sorts of tangible riches. But all that is less important than the item of inestimable value, the connection we have which means that we could give away everything else, lose everything else, but still be richly blessed. That relationship with Jesus Christ. If we lost even this beautiful building we would still be the community of the church here, people who share that relationship and connection and we would still have the most important elements of what makes us who we are.

The parables Jesus told which we heard today, about 'treasure in a field' and 'one pearl of great value' (Matthew 13:44-45) are about that discovery of what is truly valuable in our lives. When we know that treasure then nothing that happens to us, not even any physical disaster, not even death, can take it away.

The end of the passage we read this morning from Paul's letter to the Romans is something often used at funerals as that sort of declaration, affirmation. "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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." (Romans 8:38-39)

When we live knowing that, others see it. Others recognise that there is something more valuable that defines and shapes us than the material things we might have. And that is attractive. Like Achmed in the story, people DO come and ask, what do you have that is so valuable? What gives you strength, resilience, hope? What is it that inspires you to be generous, compassionate, caring? What helps you to hold on when life throws curve balls, when health issues come suddenly, when disaster does strike? People do want to know.

What connects together all of us, despite how different we are from each other, despite our differences and foibles and sometimes very obvious lack of perfection ... what sticks us together as people who work together serving and sharing a hopeful timeless message? As it was for Saint Paul it is "the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord." That relationship is what has brought me half way across the country and what has brought you out on a cold morning from your cozy beds. It is a relationship which is not just serious and deep but also fun and full of amazing joy!

We will use all sorts of connections and opportunities and celebrations to invite people to come here and share community with us. We will have concerts and events and gatherings to pique the interests of the people around us. We will do that over food, through flowers and pets and art and pageantry and music. We will do all sorts of things to build those bridges which invite people around us to join us here.

Yet the strongest invitation will be our integrity and the glow which comes from living with that relationship with Jesus at the heart of who we are, as the most valuable thing in our lives. Nothing can beat that. Without that inside us and our lives even the best publicity events will be worth little more than what Paul called 'loss'. But when that relationship is here, lived and seen in us, people will want to know who we are and why. They will want to know who we know and we will want to make the introduction!

May it be so among us. Amen

Paul Mitchell.