

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost 2023

It is often said by modern commentators that universities today are concerned with making people ready to work, when their real role is to make them ready to think. Do we have a problem? Are there too few folk today being engaged in critical thinking in the arts, in philosophy and theology and does this, in part, contribute to the indifference of many towards issues of faith?

Let's pretend that your name just so happened to be Aladdin, and you were browsing Kerry-Anne's 'Better Bits' stall and you discover a rather nice, exotic looking brass lamp. At home later you happen to be polishing it and a genie pops out and offers you three wishes, I wonder what you'd say! To a very small degree something similar happened to King Solomon in our first reading this morning. In this passage often called Solomon's dream he is asked by God what he most desires. He replies: *Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern what is right.* And so because he didn't ask for a bottomless bottle of single malt, or a Ferrari or whatever else you can imagine, because he asked for wisdom, it was granted to him. Things did not go well for Solomon later; he was not faithful, and his God given wisdom failed him. But that's another story.

The tales of *Arabian Nights* or *One thousand and one nights* were first introduced to Europe in a French translation by Antoine Galland in 1704. He later added 'Aladdin and his Magic Lamp', along with 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves', and 'The Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor' having been told these stories in Paris, interestingly by a Christian Maronite storyteller from Aleppo in Syria, named Hanna Diab.

There is much to the story that we don't have in our modern Disney versions, at one point the lamp is invisible to the dealer, but Aladdin has been granted to ability to see it clearly. There are also two Genies - good and evil. The story has about it a certain parable like quality. Nothing and no one are quite as they seem. This is the key to the parable in the Jewish tradition – think the Prodigal Son or two of the parables we read this morning, the buried treasure, and the pearl of great price; they all demand of us the gift of wisdom. The Jewish parables are like that, often illustrated stories, but also puzzles or enigmas, they can tease, mystify, even alienate.

Late on Friday afternoon I was in the front garden raking leaves, praying for inspiration! A member of our community, a friend appeared, and we spoke about Thursday's gospel and sermon. It was also from Matthew; it was the parable about the parables; the disciples asking Jesus 'why do you only teach in parables.' His response is somewhat enigmatic, he quotes Isaiah, who wants folk to open their eyes and ears and hearts, to be healed. We wondered about parables in our day, and I went back to raking leaves.

In the Vatican II Constitution *Gaudium et Spes – Joy and Hope* we read about Atheism and other new ways of believing, or not, as the case may be. The Constitution stated: *‘There are also those who never enquire about God; religion never seems to trouble or interest them at all, nor do they see why they should bother about it.’* This was sixty years ago, the issue is still with us, perhaps even more so given the Census data and the increased numbers of folk ticking ‘no religion.’ Many writers on church matters and church growth speak about ‘indifference’ as being widespread in the west, and being perhaps the most difficult form of unbelief to counter.

I wonder if Jesus encountered a similar problem and I wonder if he tried to overcome that problem by using parables to engage at another level. At the end of our gospel passage today we read that Jesus went home, he was quickly spotted...that’s Mary and Joseph’s young fella, his brothers and sisters live up the way! And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief. In Mark’s gospel he is even more brutal Jesus could do *no* deeds of power. They were indifferent towards him. This indifference stymied deeds of power, stymied mission.

Today’s parables are about that which is beyond price, and which requires of us, among other things, the gift of wisdom, of discernment – they are about the kingdom of God. But Jesus teaches in only parables because the kingdom is not what you think, nothing is quite as it seems, open your eyes, and your ears. It is not a place; it is the love of God which Paul tells us we cannot be separated from. Too many folks are indifferent about Christian faith because they look around them and fail to see the kingdom. In Jesus’ time they saw Roman occupation, corrupt religion, poverty and sickness, things haven’t really changed. Paul tells us that none of these things can separate us from God’s love, from God’s reign. Yes, this kingdom, God’s love is something beyond anything we can imagine, priceless beyond understanding, it is beyond time, both ancient and forever new.

Parables are not moral stories, the characters in them are often quite amoral. The merchant seems obsessed with finding the perfect pearl, the man who finds the treasure appears to be digging in someone else’s field. I wonder if Jesus is saying neither of these gentlemen really owned this treasure or this pearl. Neither of them were actually searching for it, they stumbled on it. The Kingdom of God is something that we can often stumble into when we are not expecting it. We will know it when we experience it, should we have the eyes and ears, the wisdom to realise it because it will challenge us. It will create within us a desire so profound that we are willing to allow it to change our lives; because the kingdom is not a destination but a way of life, it involves the wisdom to be open to God’s love in our world, how can we be indifferent to that? What would you ask of God in a dream...or the Genie! Amen.