

“Letter To William”

(Matthew 13.44-46)

Grant Bullen

Introduction

Welcome William... on this day you become a full member of Christ’s community... the church. You’ve always been with us from the moment you were a tiny heart-beat in your mother’s womb, but today it becomes ‘official’... promises made... sealed through the sacrament of water in Holy Baptism. We belong together... held together in the love of God that’s been our shared gift since life began.

I’m giving your Mum and Dad a certificate – they’ll show it to you one day. It gives you the details – who, when and where. And then it gives you a long list of your duties as a member of the church – reading the Bible, sharing in the Eucharist, participating in church life... praying, witnessing... loving everyone you meet and working for peace and justice. It’s a *long* and demanding list of obligations you pick up today... and if you’re like me, you’ll always know yourself as imperfect in living them out. Don’t be distressed about that – see it as a call and an invitation, a journey that leads ever-onwards, not a test that you can fail.

But I notice that nowhere on this certificate does it speak of what we, the church, promise to you... nothing about *our* duties and obligations. That seems a glaring omission on *our* part. So, that’s what today’s sermon is William... me as priest on behalf of the church, saying something about what you can legitimately expect from us.

There’s a whole lot we’re supposed to offer you now you’re officially one of us. Like...

- unconditional love... regardless of what you do in your life;
- always being here for you as a *home*... no matter how far you wander;
- suffering with you when the hard times come;
- encouraging you to live faithfully and well...

and a whole lot more. It too is a long list! But that’s too much for a sermon William. (By the time you read this, you’ll know yourself that there’s something about church that means that adults get bored if a priest talks for any more than 15 minutes.) I can only say *one* thing... and only a *little* bit about that one thing. So I’ll choose the one thing that’s been most precious to me in my baptism journey.

The thing I thank the church for most, is for introducing me to the Way of Life, taught by Jesus of Nazareth, who in faith we know to be the Christ. Jesus was a teacher of Wisdom... or to put it more plainly, he taught us how to *live*... in freedom and abundance... a truly good life. And the church, for all its many faults and imperfections, is the community that carries his teaching. For this wisdom I am endlessly grateful... and this gift will be offered to you too.

The Kingdom

Jesus' 'summary word' for the experience of a happy abundant life was *The Kingdom*... and he talked about it all the time. He said that when we choose to live in union with God, this very different way of life opens up... It's like the scales drop from our eyes, and the old rubbish that's been clogging our view drops away... and we can see true reality... and experience *freedom, peace, happiness*... swept along in this outrageously generous flow of Love.

To the surprise of most people, he said this *abundant life experience* (The Kingdom) was always within reach. It was *here and now* – not somewhere else... not reserved for a privileged few who made it to heaven (whatever that is) in the future. We're actually in *it* (The Kingdom) the whole time... but because we don't see it, don't recognise it, don't live it, we're always anxious and angry about what we think we don't have... and we spend so much time and energy chasing *happiness* in all the wrong places.

So although it's here and now, the *abundant life experience* is actually quite elusive. The sad truth is that only a very few people ever wake up to it.

Jesus was always trying to get people to wake up! And so he told these funny stories (parables) about *how* we might find the Kingdom that is hidden right before our eyes...

Parables

Two of these stories we read at your Baptism today. The church opens its treasure chest of wisdom (13.52) and retells these stories for you as you begin your journey on Jesus' Way of Life...

One is about a jewel merchant who was always hunting for the perfect pearl. And one day... after searching and searching and searching... he found it! He found The Kingdom – just like that! There it was, right in front of him.

William, this has always been a favourite story of mine, because that's how life has felt to me. I've searched and searched... I've tried so hard to find that elusive doorway to abundant life, and this parable has encouraged me... 'Keep going! You'll find it one day'. And I think there's truth here –because the Kingdom is hidden to our sight, you have to be looking for it. But now I've come to think that the parable that precedes it, is even *more* important...

*There's this guy who's trespassing¹ in a field – we don't know what he's doing... taking a short cut or looking for mushrooms – but anyway he's jumped the fence and he shouldn't be there. And would you believe it, **he** stumbles over a great treasure (The Kingdom)... completely by accident. It's been there for 'ever' and no-one knew... but this guy finds it! Who would have thought that?*

It's taken me a long time William, but I get it now. All of *this* is God's grace – it's not dependent on me and my striving. I'll fall over The Kingdom one day. It will probably happen unexpectedly, and it may well be in a place I don't think I even should be. I'll stumble over the hidden entrance and fall right in! I understand now – in this business of life ,you just have to keep turning-up and God will do the rest. (Although as you'll learn... *turning-up* takes effort, courage and intention often!

Essential Wisdom

Both stories end the same way... so this is something Jesus really wanted us to know. Both men²...

- know they've found *the* great treasure... the Kingdom... they recognise its value;
- and they 'go for it' – they sell *everything* because they know that *this* treasure matters more than *anything* else in their lives.

So William, you've got to be able to recognise what's in front of you – to discern what is of true and real value... what will lead to freedom, abundance and happiness. Because not everything does... and sadly we're bequeathing a culture to you that thinks having '*more of everything*' is what makes you happy. But

¹ This is how Eugene Peterson translates the story – the man is a '*trespasser*'. I've heard other scholars say the same thing so I assume there must be something in the Greek that suggests the man shouldn't be there. It certainly isn't his field!

² And they could have just as easily been women!

that's not true – wisdom teaches that only *some* things lead to LIFE... and you need to know how to recognise them.

And when you do stumble across that which *really* matters, you've got to go for it. You've got to invest your heart, your energy, your time into it! You'll never get wet by dipping in your toes at the water's edge. You've got to rip off your clothes and jump in! Sadly even in the church, you'll be told that you can *dabble* with the Way of Jesus as an add-on to your life... but it doesn't work like that. And you'll be told – especially by society – that '*you can have it all*', but that's also not true William. Every choice for something of true value, requires closing-off, putting-down, letting-go... something else. The guys in the parables sell *everything* else... because they want the treasure!

Conclusion

Well William, there's so much more I'd like to say, but I'm dangerously close to that 15 minute cut-off zone, so I have to stop... but maybe we can talk about this someday... although I'll be an even older man by then.

So... welcome William. You are most definitely a gift to us! I hope and pray we might be some sort of gift to you too. And more than anything else, I hope and pray that one day... maybe when you're not even looking for it, you'll stumble across the treasure of The Kingdom.