

*“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field,
which a person finds and hides again,
and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.
Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant
searching for fine pearls.
When he finds a pearl of great price,
he goes and sells all that he has and buys it.”*

A long, long time ago in the middle of the ancient 1990s of the 20th century, in a distant city sitting at the foothills of beautiful mountains, lived a great man. He was a Catholic priest and an expert on the writings of the fathers of the Church, the theologians and preachers of the first 500 years of Christianity. He was considered the best expert and the most charismatic preacher, highly respected by his peers and loved by his students. Among his students there was a group of feisty and talented Dominican brothers. Since they had slowly begun realizing that their life would be the life of preaching the Gospel of Christ, they decided to seize the opportunity and scam the old priest to give them an easy recipe for the fruitful and faithful life of preaching. This is what he told them: “There is only one way of preaching the Gospel, and this way is presented to us by Jesus in multiple ways, but the most succinct of them is this: there was a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it. This is what the kingdom of heaven is like.”

Every time I read the Gospel of Matthew, I think about that answer given to us in Krakow in 1993. Every time I think about it, I am grateful both to Jesus for telling us those stories, and to Father Staniek for making us pay attention to the words of Christ.

What is the kingdom of heaven? The answer is not easy. Listening carefully to Jesus’ words we are learning that under the name “kingdom of heaven,” he means what we often call “God’s world,” which is God’s love, God’s will, all his actions, everything he did, and everything he does now, even our relationship with him. Under the term “kingdom of heaven,” he hides an amazing world of God’s love. He wants me to enter this world. How can I do that?

Like everything truly precious, truly priceless, it cannot be simply purchased, negotiated, somehow transferred to a personal account. It also cannot be forced on a person, it cannot be inherited, it cannot be given out of pity or sympathy. It has to be actively received by a free decision of a free person. The kingdom of God behaves like love because it is love. And love lives in a very delicate world of freedom. Without freedom, there is no love. Freedom is the only way to receive the kingdom because God is endlessly free in his gift, and he wants us to be as free as he is.

The kingdom of heaven also comes with a price. Like every true love, it must cost me everything I have because true love has to transform or push aside everything that I consider mine. Any other way is either dishonest (promising under the guise of the kingdom of God something that is not the kingdom of God, i.e. ideology, emotion, advice on self-improvement) or misleading (pretending that there is “an easy way” that leads to the kingdom, which is impossible because the very perfection of the kingdom dictates the nature of the way to it.)

Why would anybody pay such a steep price for it? As always happens with love, to not receive it, is to reject it. And to reject absolute, pure, and total love of God is to throw away your own life. Although the nature of the kingdom escapes human descriptions, it could still be experienced in our daily life. Love of parents or children, the adventure of marriage, true friendship, every human greatness and every human hope have some characteristics of the kingdom of heaven because they all have a foundation in God’s love. That’s why to miss the kingdom of heaven is to miss the greatest treasure of life: the Life itself.

Who can speak like that? Isn’t it a little arrogant to presume that I can offer to anybody a transaction of such value? Well, it would be, if what I am presenting to others is from me. But the treasure in the field and the precious pearl are not mine, they belong to God, and he himself is the one who offers us his business. I can only humbly purchase it myself and testify to others that the One who truly gives is trustworthy. This is the only method of preaching to the Gospel of Jesus.

“Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old.”