

**Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A  
(July 24, 2011)**

**Great Desires**

If God appeared to you as we heard he did to Solomon in our first reading and asked, “What would you like more than anything else in the world?” what would you ask for?

Solomon asked for an understanding heart to be able to judge his people and to distinguish right from wrong. I’m told that the original Hebrew says “a listening heart.” A listening heart – that’s probably what it takes to be understanding – the ability to listen before judging or reacting.

God almost seems surprised by Solomon’s answer. It’s as though God expected him to ask for riches or a long life or conquest of his enemies. But, God says, since you asked for an understanding heart to be able to govern your people wisely, I will give it to you. And in point of fact God gave Solomon those other things as well.

In the Gospel passage Jesus tells two stories about people who accidentally find things they want more than anything else in the world – buried treasure, a very precious pearl. How do we know they want them more than anything else in the world? Well, they sell everything they have in order to possess them.

Jesus tells us these stories are about the kingdom of God. So, as far as he is concerned, it is the kingdom of God we should desire more than anything else in the world – in the world – in *this* world. People think the kingdom of God is about the next world – some future life. But the way Jesus talks about it makes it quite clear that the kingdom of God is already here. At the beginning of Mark’s gospel the first words we hear Jesus say are, “The kingdom of God is here.” And in another place he says, “The kingdom of God is in your midst.”

So what is this elusive kingdom of God that we hear so much about and that Jesus constantly tells us stories about what it is like without ever saying exactly what it is?

When Jesus taught us to pray, he said to pray this way: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done as earth as it is in heaven. Now these two petitions

go together. When the will of God is done on earth then the kingdom of God happens. So let's risk a definition of the kingdom and say it is that community of people bonded together under the leadership of Jesus to do the will of God on earth.

God's kingdom then is nothing more, nothing less than God's will being done. And what is God's will? It's quite clear from the first pages of sacred scripture that what God wants is the well-being of the people. And wasn't that exactly what Jesus wanted as well?

Consider for instance what Jesus did. Jesus always gave life. He seemed in fact to be only interested in that. When he met a deaf man, he said: hear. When he met a blind man he said: see. When he met a paralyzed man he said: walk. When he met a speechless person, he said: speak.

When he met that dead boy in Naim, the widow's only son, and the dead girl in Jairus's house, and his dead friend Lazarus, he said, don't stay that way. Get out of your stupor. Live! And they all stood up, rejoiced, perhaps they danced for joy because they had regained their lives.

Jesus gave life. He restored life. He stimulated life, he tuned it up. And he didn't just do that in a physical or bodily sense. He went also to people who were spiritually blocked or psychologically frustrated. He identified himself with the poor, the wretched, the prostitutes, the adulterers, the widows, the orphans, the elderly, the crooks, and the vagrants.

Take Zacchaeus, for instance, that greedy tax collector who thought only in terms of money. Jesus stayed in his house one day and he became a different man. He changed completely and became generous as God is generous.

In the beginning, we read in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, God created. God gave life everywhere and God saw that it was good. And when God made human beings, God saw that it was very good. That's exactly what Jesus did from the moment he started. That's why people came to understand that he was the Son of God, because like God he was only interested in people's well-being, the kingdom of God, the treasure, the pearl of great price.

The well-being of the people. That's simply another way of saying

“the common good.” Believe it or not the lesson we are being taught here is that the kingdom of God happens when we all work together for the common good, not just for my good, but for the good of all.

Have we bought this treasure? This pearl of great price? The way to find out is to ask ourselves: do we contribute in our work, in our decisions, in our laws, in our education, in our politics, and in all our activities, to the well-being of the people – all the people? Or are we like Zacchaeus before he met Jesus and before he really started to live? It is terribly important for all of us who are worshipping here today to learn this lesson and make it part of our lives. Then we can hope and pray that what is part of our lives will spill over into the city, the nation, the world we live in so that the people who govern us will all learn to work together for the common good, that is, for the good of all.

Jesus urges us to invest in the kingdom of God. He tells us to sell everything we have so we can buy that great treasure, that precious pearl. It's the only really safe investment, guaranteed by God. And you know, there is something else that is rather startling. Remember that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to die for the world and after the resurrection God sent the Spirit to be part of our common nature. That means God invested everything that God held most dear in us human beings. We are God's treasure. We are God's pearl of great price. What then should we be investing in return to make God and the kingdom of God our treasure, our pearl of great price?