



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Staked on Christ"**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament 1 Kings 3:5-12
Epistle Romans 8:26-34
Gospel Matthew 13:31-33,44-49a

I will soon run out of stories from my home-leave this year, but I haven't yet. This one is really just the comment that while I was in Chicago, I attended several seminar sessions taught by a dear friend of mine at the venerable Newberry Library. This institution is one of the foremost research libraries in the world, and it also just happens to contain one of the largest collections of Philippine historical documents and memorabilia in the world. But I didn't travel thousands of miles to Chicago to study the Philippines. I was part of the discussion of a work called *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, the religious autobiography of John Henry Newman. This man is thought to be one of the greatest minds of the 19th century and is studied not only for his religion, but also for his use of the English language. The work that the seminar studied dealt with his painful decision, made in 1845, to leave the Anglican Church and become a Roman Catholic. It is a decision facing many Anglicans even today as they consider the rather chaotic state of our church and long for someplace that seems, to them, a bit more stable. Sometimes they are happy with the choice; other times they discover a church family that has every bit as many problems as ours does...just different ones!

Newman's sermons and writings still have great worth for Anglicans, however. In fact, some of his greatest works date from his days in the Church of England, before

his conversion. From one of his sermons, preached at the collegiate church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford, comes a very insightful proposition: "Ask yourselves if, in the event of the kingdom disappearing, there might be something in your life you would have to change; if you are aware of nothing to be changed, it is because your life is not staked on Christ and the kingdom."

Newman writes in another place words that have haunted me with their truth:

"We are by nature what we are; very sinful and corrupt, we know; however, we like to be what we are, and for many reasons it is unpleasant to us to change. We cannot change ourselves; this too we know full well....God alone can change us; God alone can give us the desires, affections, principles, views and tastes which a change implies: this too we know.... What then is it that we who profess religion lack? I repeat it, this: a willingness to be changed, a willingness to suffer (if I may use such a word), to suffer Almighty God to change us. We do not like to let go of ourselves; and in whole or part, though all is offered to us freely, we cling hold to our old selves. Though we were promised no troubles at all in the change, though there were no self-denial, no exertion in changing, the case would not be altered. We do not like to be new-made; we are afraid of it; it is throwing us out of all our natural ways, of all that is familiar to us. We feel as if we should not be ourselves any longer, if we do not keep some portion of what we have been hitherto; and much as we profess in general terms to wish to be changed, when it comes to the point, when particular instances of change are presented to us, we shrink from them, and are content to remain unchanged."

Today's Gospel gives us sayings about the Kingdom of God. We hear that it is a 'treasure in a field that someone sells everything to buy', that finding it is like 'a merchant looking for fine pearls', and that the coming of the kingdom is like a 'drednet cast into the sea that brings in a haul of all kinds [of fish]'. When we hear these words, though, most of us tend to picture the Kingdom of God as something of a fantasy. If it is anything, it is some kind of reward at the end of our lives, something perhaps hoped for but not something that we really want to *change* for. And the Church, this little corner of the Kingdom of God right here, the place

where this Kingdom is supposed to be breaking through, yes even that is treated by most people as very much an extra- something that is used in an emergency or for special occasions, but not all the time.

Newman's question might be restated thus: "If the *Church* disappeared- not just Holy Trinity (which is always possible given our finances)- but the Christian Church and its Faith, what would you lose?" How would you feel? Would it be a great relief? Just think: no need to get up on Sunday mornings and get the kids dressed to come to church; no need to feel guilty about not keeping your pledge current; no need to worry about such things as ethics and morality except in the most general of ways. Not bad, some would say- not bad at all.

But there might be others who would miss something of the old religion- hymns, maybe (at least when the rector chooses ones we can sing!), or the "warm fuzzies" of Christmas and Easter. Some might miss the language of the services or even the familiar, comfortable yet challenging words of the Bible. But you could get over that, in time.

And some, bless 'em, would lose everything. They are the ones who have made a real sacrifice for this 'Christian thing,' this Church, this way of living. They have taken seriously the call to a new life and a new way of looking both at themselves and the world...and ultimately at God. They would be the really sorry ones, because nothing could take its place. They will have already changed for the sake of the Kingdom, and they won't want to change back.

But what about that question that good old Father Newman asked of his congregation at St Mary's, Oxford, about what would be changed if the Kingdom were no more? Does that Kingdom represent any commitment on our part- anything beyond turning up on Sunday or being part of the odd church event or project? Has being a Christian made any difference to us at all?

A life "staked on Christ" and the Kingdom is exactly what is expected of us when we are baptised. It is something that stands over against every other way of living, any other value system, and all competing creeds. It is meant to be overwhelming- a passion that rolls over us like a wave that takes everything with it and leaves nothing behind. Anyone who wants to follow Christ must therefore really "sell everything" for the sake of this new life and anything less than that is, well, just not enough.

As I get older and experience more and more of the glory and the shame of the Christian Church, I am increasingly of the opinion that there are two classes of Christians. There are those who "like" the Church and "like" Jesus' teachings, and if at all possible will be part of a local congregation and follow the basic moral guidelines. These are the "nice" Christians, the ones who invest at the entry level and may never want to increase their investment. God loves them, and they may very well be destined for the Kingdom, but as God is my witness they are underachievers. They don't know what they're missing and they may not care.

Then there are those whom Jesus describes in today's Gospel- the ones who find that one special pearl and know that it will be worth the risk of everything they prize in order to have it. True, there are and will be other pearls, other nice things that may make life happy, enjoyable, pleasant- but it won't be this one, extraordinary pearl that will be the key to a fulfillment, a meaning, that puts everything else to shame. That's what salvation is all about- risking it all for what is the most important- the thing that will last.

Now if what I say is offensive to some, I apologize. I have been known to speak both out of turn and ill advisedly. But before you take me to task, I can only ask that you re-read today's Gospel and the things that Jesus, not Fr Tyler, is saying about the Kingdom of God. And then ask that same question that Newman did so long ago to see what is true for you: "If the Kingdom of God disappeared, what in your life would you have to change?" And if the answer is nothing, what does that mean?

What is your 'pearl of great price'?

