

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Dragnet

There used to be a detective series called *Dragnet*. About today's parable of Jesus there is similarly an interface with evil; you put out a perfectly neutral net, and in comes a catch which is part good and part useless. You have to sort it out before you can proceed. The setting of this parable close to the one about the merchant looking for fine pearls is important for our understanding. As in last week's parable of the weeds, Matthew rushes to light up the fire, though, to my mind, fishermen would be far likelier to throw poor fish back into the sea than to engineer their cremation (a difficult business, anyway, I should have thought).

Concentrate on the Fishermen

So spare me Matthew's bonfire, and let me think about the fishermen. Our efforts bring us a mixed harvest, indeed; and what we catch, grow, or produce by our efforts is never all good and positive. How do we respond when the results are dubious? The gospel is clear - as Jesus was - in saying: *Be firm! Throw it away what's worthless, and make do with what's left!* Now, how does this principle engage us in our real life? For fishermen it is easier. They can't expect to sell rotten fish, and the good fish they have won't sell unless it's clean, fresh and well-presented. But in real life people do not follow this simple rule. We try to bodge and patch our lives together using whatever's to hand: a bit of falsehood here, a bit of pretence there, a good dose of self-deception to help it down, and we wonder why we do not feel sound or substantial at the end of it. Compare this with the uncompromising Jesus: *If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out! Better to enter into life (one-eyed) than to go to hell (with two eyes).* Vividly expressed, isn't it?

All My Own Work

We have to cultivate brutal frankness about what we do with our lives. Does my contribution really work, or am I a danger to shipping? The fact that the damage I do may be as a result of my most cherished ideals is precisely the point. That's what makes me persist, disastrously digging myself deeper and deeper into the hole! I'm like a member of the crew steadfastly refusing to throw away the most malodorous and inedible of fish, because he spent such a huge effort catching it under the mistaken impression that it was a beautiful sturgeon. Honesty sometimes has to be

sacrificial. *Throw it away* can sometimes come very hard. But if you've missed your turning - even if it was a long time ago - there is often no way except backwards for you to go; undignified it may be, but it's the only path to life.

Decide What You Want

Behind all the above are the universal terms "good" and "evil". If these words mean something real to you, then the parable will work easily. The fishermen know good from bad, and they are able to choose. But we should spare a thought for the many people around us who have been brought up with no firm idea of good and bad. They may have been told all kinds of stuff by people who ought to know better: that if you want to do something, that makes it all right *for you*; that if you don't harm other people that makes everything OK, and the rest. Their "catch" is as much in need of a sharp eye as anyone else's. This is the ability which we call judgment; it belongs of right only to God, who knows what the purpose of everything is in the end. God's judgment will be the last word, just as his creation is the first word.

There's A Pearl In My Oyster!

If some of us are unsure about how to tell a rotten fish, it can also be true that we aren't good at spotting pearls. These parables are clearly leading us to value *discernment* - the gift Solomon chose when God gave him his choice of gifts. The people in the parables are learning to choose; once they have what they've set their heart on, they are quite ready to turn their backs on everything else. That is the moment when they get their faith, and set it in position as the guiding star of their lives. It's the most precious moment, but it's not cost-free. The theme of *selling all to buy the one pearl* takes up the theme of sacrifice. It costs everything; but the recognition of a single desire is ultimately liberating, because a plethora of desires pulls us apart, but a single desire brings harmony and peace, one pilgrimage, one path, one treasure, one heart.

Fr Philip

