

17TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A (2026)

The Bright Field by R. S. Thomas:

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

Allow me to un-burden myself of a controversial opinion: mobile phones should not be allowed in art galleries. I was recently confirmed in this prejudice when I visited the Zurbaran exhibition at the *National Gallery*: though I thought I had chosen my timings so as to avoid youngsters taking pictures of every artwork and accompanying description without actually taking the time to look at the painting or read the caption, I was dismayed to discover that this anti-social and pernicious habit is not only confined to those belonging to *Gen Z* and below – it is rife; and seemingly every Tom, Dick and Harriet is more interested in preserving the experience than in actually experiencing it. The ability to stand still, to observe, and to take in one's immediate environment has all but disappeared in contemporary society, and this is a problem.

And the consequences of this malaise are not only limited to the realm of the secular – they are also spiritual; and today's readings, and the poem with which I began, by the C20th Welsh priest and poet, R. S. Thomas, point to their cure.

Over the last few Sundays, the Church has presented us with several of Jesus' parables about the nature and remit of the Kingdom of God; and those that we have heard today have likened that imminent and frequently illusive entity to the discovery of hidden treasure, a pearl of great price, and an indiscriminate catch of fish. And, whilst Jesus' similes might appear straightforward enough to understand, they point to a deeper truth that so often passes us by – that God's kingdom in all its richness and fulness is not only a cause for hope, and our future destiny, but that it also here, now, and in our midst – both now and not yet.

Because, put quite simply, that Kingdom is anywhere God is present and at work: Jesus himself told his followers that 'the Kingdom of God is within you'; and the Church, however imperfect because of human sin, is the visible manifestation of that Kingdom on earth. And those earthly glimpses of God's presence and power – his justice, mercy, truth and grace – are given so that humanity, in cooperation with God's providence and will, might begin to live the life of heaven on earth, and play our part in advancing the virtues and values of life as it shall be where God's presence is all in all, and sin and death no longer hold sway.

But we cannot be part of that great work if we are not convinced of its necessity; nor can we commit ourselves to a cause in which we do not wholeheartedly

believe. God's Kingdom is already amongst us, is already within us, but most of the time we fail to perceive it: we might be vaguely aware of something, but not understand its true significance; and, all too often, we're just too busy or distracted by the ordinary business of life to dwell on deep spiritual truths.

And this is why, like Solomon, we need to pray for wisdom and understanding: because these divine gifts of grace are not limited to those of advanced years or experience; but, rather, are the virtues that enable us all to set things temporal within the context of the eternal, whilst not losing hold of either; just as they open our hearts, eyes and ears to God's presence in the surprising, the unexpected, and the seemingly pointless, and thus make the whole of life a conduit by which God's grace might be attained, and his presence perceived.

And what all of this is really about is what the priest and theologian, Austen Farrer, called 'the practice of the sacrament of the present moment': those who stand in art galleries taking pictures of the Zurbaran, the Rembrandt, or the Hockney, rather than taking the time to look at the pictures themselves through the filter of their own eyes, epitomise the inability to give one's full attention to the present moment, and the failure to be receptive to the grace and possibility that any moment or situation might reveal. Photographs might evoke happy memories, but they cannot compensate for attention paid in the here and now. And to possess the pearl of great price is to understand this; and deliberately to open oneself to the revelation of the divine at every time and in every

circumstance; and, especially, in every human encounter, as we bear to each other something of the image, the grace, and the glory of God.

Well, that's the theory, but let's come back down to earth for a bit; because, as we know, those experiences are very few and far between. And that's not because God is absent from us; but because, most of the time, we do not make ourselves present to him. So often, we find ourselves 'hurrying on / to a receding future, [or] hankering after / an imagined past', either deliberately or unconsciously; and, thus, we miss opportunities for growth and service, as well as unintentionally depriving ourselves of much-needed inner peace and grace.

In the life of faith, we need wisdom to discern what really matters, and what doesn't; and the grace to use the present moment to the full. Of course, we may look back on our lives and see God's hand at work, as it surely has been; but we human beings are given to a nostalgia that clouds our judgment and reminiscences, and convinces us that the past is a better, and safer, place than the present. Likewise, we are apt to invest all our hope and energy in the pursuit of future happiness, convinced that things will only get better, whilst spurning or neglecting the good gifts of today. To live the life of the Kingdom most fully in the present is to be where God *is*, and not where he was or will be; because, no amount of reminiscing can reclaim, or forward-planning enhance, the graces, opportunities and mystery of right now. And to understand that is truly to be wise, and to have discovered the greatest treasure of all. Amen.