

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

In 2012 a Filipino Catholic Priest, Fr Edwin Gariguez, won the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize for leading a grassroots movement against a nickel mine project on the Phillipine island of Mindoro. He wanted to protect the biodiversity and the indigenous people from destructive large-scale mining. The campaign had the support of the Filipino bishops.

The Mangyan people had lived sustainably from the island's natural resources for many generations. However, Mindoro's nickel deposits attracted foreign mining companies, anxious to supply a mineral that plays a major role in everyday lives in the rest of the world – in food preparation equipment, mobile phones, medical equipment, transport, buildings, power generation. A Norwegian mining company had proposed the open-pit nickel mine near two key biodiversity areas and within the watershed that feeds the island's four major rivers. These provide drinking water to lowland communities and irrigation for Mindoro's rice fields. The mine would use a process known as acid leaching to access the nickel ore, producing several million tons of toxic waste, contaminating the island's water resources and destroying the tropical forests. Mindoro's Mangyan indigenous communities would be heavily impacted by the mine, as the proposed mining area was within their ancestral land. Fr Edwin and the indigenous people put a case highlighting the value of the mountains, rivers, plants and wildlife that would be destroyed by the project. They felt there was little appreciation of the treasure of the natural world that would be lost.

Today's first reading talks about the God-given wisdom and discernment of Solomon, who asked for this gift ahead of material wealth or power. The Gospel suggests through parables that to know God and to live according to the Gospel are the most precious things in life. Through Jesus and the Gospel we come to know and understand the real meaning of life and what are the most important things. In one parable a man comes across treasure hidden in a field, which does not belong to him. He sells everything he has in order to get

ownership of the field and hence of its buried treasure. When one discovers Jesus and a vision of life governed by kingdom values, everything else becomes secondary. The second parable is similar. A businessman is looking for fine pearls. When he finds the one he wants, he sells everything he has in order to acquire it.

In the first parable the man was not actually looking for the treasure. Perhaps he found it while digging the ground or ploughing the field in the course of his ordinary working day. The experience of God's kingdom may come unexpectedly through some everyday experience. Many people have described their conversion to Christ as happening in such an unexpected way. In the second parable however, the man is on the lookout for the "pearl of great price". He knows it must exist and he uses all his energies to find it. Although we are baptised Christians, we are still called to pursue constantly the full meaning of the Gospel, which can escape us for many years. We can always understand more, love more, serve more.

Though stories of treasures found aren't that uncommon, most of us experience moments of grace when something simple gives unexpected pleasure or we suddenly realise how blessed we are with family, friends and an awesome natural environment. Perhaps we are also sitting on a hidden treasure, or in danger of losing one. How often do we reflect on what families and friends mean to us, particularly those who are elderly or going through difficult periods in their lives? How often do we reflect on the origin of our food and whether it was produced sustainably? Do we have the wisdom to appreciate the treasure that is fresh air or the treasure that is fresh water.

For much of the time we are chasing false treasures. What might these be? We can be locked into the past – full of nostalgia or regrets; or focussed on the future – on longings and desires that we have not yet achieved, or depressing fears and anxieties. Meanwhile the enriching present passes us by; the treasure is never discovered and the really valuable pearl is never found. Jesus teaches us to learn to appreciate what is good and truly valuable and, in addition, to seek out new ways to respond to the signs of our times and live in God's love.