

This past month I started reading the unabridged version of The Count of Monte Christo by Alexandre Dumas. It's 1200 pages long! But a good read. That story was in my mind as I read today's Gospel parable of the buried treasure because The Count of Monte Christo also involves a hidden treasure. And I see a connection between the two stories, so pardon me if I take a moment to outline the story.

It begins in the age of Napoleon with a young Frenchman Edmond Dantes, who is about to be married to the love of his life, Mercedes, and get a promotion to captain of a merchant ship. Life is great. But three unscrupulous men conspire to frame him and send him to jail for a crime he didn't commit. He's sentenced to life imprisonment in the notorious Chateau D'If.

One day, as he rots away in his cell, he hears a soft scrapping sound. Lo and behold, it is coming from behind the wall of his cell. It proves to be a fellow-prisoner trying to dig out of the prison, a priest, Fr. Faria. Even in his cell, Dantes has heard the guards talk of this crazy

old man. Fr. Faria keeps going on and on with this wild story of a fabulous buried treasure whose location only he knows. It could all be theirs, he promises, if only they will free him and let him lead them to it. They laugh at him. But now here is Fr. Faria in Dantes' cell. He had made a mistake in his calculations - and instead of hitting an outer wall, he has ended up there. But at least there is a tunnel between their cells and a friendship develops.

Fr. Faria doesn't seem to be crazy at all. In fact, he is very cultivated and educated and he begins to teach Dantes all the knowledge of the world during their years together in the Chateau D'If. Eventually Faria brings up the treasure. And Dantes thinks, "Poor man, He seems so sane in other ways." He doesn't want to listen to the priest's ravings. He's embarrassed for him. But Faria loves Dantes as if he were his own son and wants Dantes to have the treasure should he finally escape. So, eventually Dantes lets Faria tell his story. The priest tells him the detailed directions to where the unimaginably huge

treasure is buried – on the Island of Monte Christo. “Could it be true? No! It’s all nonsense.” And even if the story were true, and the treasure was real, how could Dantes get to it?

And here again Fr. Faria comes to his aid - by dying. Faria “bequeaths” the treasure to Dantes as he dies one day in Dantes’ arms of a massive stroke. The guards wrap the body in a shroud and leave it on the dead man’s bed until the tide comes in – because the graveyard at the Chateau D’If is the sea. The prison sits upon the edge of a great cliff overlooking the Mediterranean. They just hurl the bodies of dead prisoners into the sea. So, Dantes gets an idea. He drags Faria’s body to his own cell, puts him his bed and covers him with a blanket, as if he were asleep. Then Dantes takes his place in the shroud and waits for the guards to come and throw him into freedom – if he survives the drop. He does survive and comes up out of the water a free man.

“The Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he

has and buys that field.” I tell that plot of The Count of Monte Christo because it is also a way to tell the story of this parable – and the whole Kerygma. Dantes is every person. We think the world is wonderful, filled with beauty. Life is good. And it is. But it’s also a prison we can’t get out of – and at some point in our lives we may very well realize we’re stuck in a dark cell.

And then along comes Jesus (Fr. Faria), having become a prisoner with us, digging into in our existential loneliness. Here is a companion, at last - all knowing, comforting in His presence. He wants to teach us all wisdom – and give us a fabulous treasure. And we do allow Him to teach us some things. But that’s all Jesus remains for most of us. A comfort, a loving presence. But the treasure part isn’t really believed.

Jesus has rescued us by dying and trading places with us on the Cross. He offers us a way out of our Chateau D’If through the waters of baptism into a new life. And in the new life is waiting an infinite

treasure of grace and spiritual gifts that changes everything . . . if we believe in the treasure and search for it.

Do you believe in the treasure Jesus wants to give us? I think most of us Christians are like Dantes. We love Jesus, but all this talk of treasure beyond our imaginations is pious nonsense. It's crazy. We're embarrassed by these supernatural, unscientific claims. It's not real.

In the book Dantes, once he begins a new life, eventually does go to the island of Monte Christo. Alone, he begins to search for the clues the old priest had made him memorize. Is it there? Was it an old man's fantasy? Then He finds the treasure and the world is his!

Jesus has promised us treasure beyond imaging. The Bible is a treasure map. The ancient Church is a guide, loving us and begging us to trust Jesus' promise. This life is the Island of Monte Christo, and the life-long search of discipleship will require and offer everything.

A couple of weeks ago I preached on the universal call to holiness. This parable and homily are a continuation of that theme, in that Jesus

offers each of us the ultimate treasure -- life in Him. (By the way that offer of a place in the Sacred Story Communities is still on. 21 people have applied, so there's still room. Go to info@hfkparish.org).

The world today seems to be going insane. Doesn't it seem that every news story is depressing? Things are falling apart. Old certainties are crumbling. Nobody knows what will happen next. It can seem as dark as the Chateau D'If. But here is Good News. In the middle of the chaos is this way to freedom and new life. Jesus has a secret He tries to share with everyone (like crazy old Fr. Faria). He knows where there is a buried treasure – and it can be yours. Do you believe in the treasure? Is finding it the most important thing in your life – worth everything?