

## INHERITING ETERNAL LIFE St Matt. 19: 16 – 26

The Gospel passage which we have heard today appears in all three Synoptic Gospels with a slight variation in St Matthew's account, where the man is described as being 'young', while in St Luke's account he is describe as a 'ruler'. What is striking, however, in the three accounts is the remarkable similarity of the details. In addition to highlighting the issue of riches and their effect on spiritual life, perhaps more importantly it juxtaposes two attitudes to religious life, that of the Law and that of the Spirit, or that of the Old Covenant and that of the New. The young man is in every sense 'religious' but his question "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" strongly suggests that he is strongly dissatisfied in some way at a deeper level with what he has attained hitherto. The account in St Mark reads that "as Jesus was setting out on his way, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, 'Good Rabbi, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?'" There is certainly more than a hint here of someone seizing a sudden opportunity to present his spiritual problems to a person whom he instinctively recognises as skilled in the business of helping souls. Hence his use of the title 'good' is applied to honour Christ. This honorific title, however, is immediately rejected by the Lord as inappropriate and is discarded in a way reminiscent of the Desert Fathers who studiously avoided praise and regarded it, if it increased, as a sound reason for leaving a place. But Jesus' answer is not especially surprising or demanding; He simply lays upon him those obligations which are prescribed for any member of the House of Israel, namely the Law of Moses, as summed up in the Ten Commandments: 'You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; honour your father and your mother etc.' It is clear that this injunction disappoints the young man, who is looking for something different, perhaps something to make him feel spiritually exalted and maybe set him above others. At this point Jesus reveals the possibilities and challenges of the spiritual life, the treasure in heaven, but also with it the price which has to be paid to attain this goal, and that is of selling everything that he has and following him just as the onlookers, the disciples, have done. As the goalposts are moved so to speak and being 'religious' assumes a new, unimagined, totally demanding dimension, the young man has to withdraw to count the cost and redraw his own spiritual map of life.

We can sympathise greatly with the young man for on the surface he seems to receive harsh treatment from Christ and is humbled, an experience which no doubt did him great good as it does us in reminding us of how lukewarm and selfish we can be as fallen and sinful creatures like everybody else. Many years ago I had a similar humbling experience when I went to see Bishop Anthony and told him that I thought I was being called to a higher vocation. He looked at me with my young wife and two children and said something like "If you wish to be a priest, which actually I didn't, tell me which of Christ's commandments you feel most called to obey?" The question of course simply blew me away and I was silenced but the answer came straightaway as I left the cathedral in London. In fact he ordained me a server on his next visit to Oxford, as I was ordained at our last patronal feast. Later he told me that he always discouraged vocation as recommended by the writer Charles Peguy to test its authenticity. We are told that the young man's countenance fell and he went away sorrowful for he had many possessions. He is, however, approved of by God since in St Mark's account it is said that Jesus looked at him and loved him because he had kept the commandments religiously and performed to the letter those duties imposed on him.

Now the same patterns in life face us. We are in our daily lives confronted by our duties. There are the moral rules of the commandments, which are designed to guide us through the sometimes complex situations which we encounter. Though these on occasions do not seem to give us what we want, they do quietly and invisibly confer on us great benefits and blessings from God since they are a kind of passport to this world. We have our

responsibilities to our families, spouses and friends, which often are reduced to a dry, grey, repetitive duty and I think especially of those with young families who these days cannot manage with one income or of those who are single parents. The experience of perseverance in the face of these feelings is important for us too. But Christ opens up the possibility of not just performing the bare duties of the Law but of stepping into a region where we operate on different principles, those of compassion, love, hope, trust to name a few, which reach down into our hearts and touch something fundamental in us and which evoke in us a power which we had not known existed before. This is the realm of the Spirit which inspired the disciples to leave their nets immediately and follow Christ, and other men and women to go to the desert. It is as superior to duty and obligation, which are good in themselves, as the Law of Love in the Kingdom of Heaven is superior to the Covenant given to the patriarchs of the Old Testament. A woman like Mother Teresa of Calcutta discovered this mystery, this pearl of great price and gave up everything to obtain it. In this realm there is no sense of fulfilment or satisfaction which leaves one feeling dry, self-satisfied but ultimately incomplete like the young man. Rather here there is a vision of our human failure because of the need of the world for the salvation of God but at the same time we experience God's love and compassion for us in our weakness and stand before his greatness in wonder and gratitude. At this point we have arrived in the company of the publican who stands at the gateway to Lent pleading to God to have mercy on him and to pardon his failures but wanting to enter more deeply into the vision of the glory of God which has opened before us.

We do not hear more of the rich young man or ruler but no doubt he never forgot that brief interview with the Lord which made such a deep impression on him. The same goes for us. We are called on to experience this mystery of giving. We are invited, not forced, to spend our material and spiritual riches in the service of Christ and his world to gain greater ones, to cast our bread upon the water so that it is returned to us. May God grant us the vision to see how each of us can do this to the advancement of his Kingdom.

***Oxford 27<sup>th</sup> August 2017***