

Church of St Edward the Confessor, Lugano

A Sermon preached by Bishop Michael Langrish on 10 October 2021 - Trinity 19



'I'll tell you what I want, what I really, really want'

In today's Gospel reading St Mark's recounting of Jesus final journey up to Jerusalem continues with an incident that we all know so well. *'Ah! Yes – the encounter with the rich young ruler'*, we say – except that Mark says nothing about him being young, just that he had many possessions – just like most of us. So, what does this incident have to say to you and me?

Whether he was young or old, I rather feel for this man who comes to Jesus with his question *"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* Poor chap: for subsequent generations he's had a pretty universally bad press, and so as soon as we begin to hear the story again we are likely to feel, *'well here's an example not to follow; here's a story of how to get things very wrong.'* I think that's a bit harsh, actually; because there are elements of this man's character and behaviour that I find quite admirable. There are some things about him that rather than be appalled by, I would quite like to copy. For example, Mark tells us that the man did not just come to him but that he **ran** to him. There's an urgency to him and his approach to the Lord. The deep questions of life: *'What is life all about? Where will it end? What in my life is really going to endure, and so is worth devoting time and energy too, now?'* These things mattered to him; and mattered deeply. He had a sense of urgency about them. To what extent is the same true of you and me? Just how much do these same questions matter as much to us? When we gather in communion Sunday by Sunday, what do we carry into our assembly and into our prayers, in our minds and on our hearts. What are the questions and the longings most at the centre of our lives as, like him, we kneel before the Lord today? And how urgent, how important is it, that we seek and listen for his response?

Then there is the man's question itself: *'Good Teacher, what must I do?'* I see no reason to think that he called Jesus 'good' in order to flatter him, but rather because he genuinely thinks so. He really does believe that, in this person Jesus, there is a goodness, a holiness, that has something to say to his life, both now and for eternity. So, a second question for me – and you? To what extent do we feel the same. How truly do we see the Jesus to whom we speak in our prayers, in our worship, here today, and what do we truly expect from him most of all? What is the question for Jesus most urgently on your lips right now?

This is where the man in the gospel story does begin to get it wrong. His question was: *'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'*

The form in which the question is asked gives us a clue to what is to follow. What we see immediately about this man is a deep **self-concern**. *"What must I do to benefit me?"* Not *"Lord, what can I do for the sake of the world, for people around me, for the good of the world, for God's sake?"* But *"What can I do for me?"*

And so is it at all surprising that in answering, Jesus points him to that 50% of the ten commandments that have to do with a person's relationship with other people: the ones about not murdering, or committing adultery; or stealing; or dishonesty; or neglecting the family: all about ways of behaving, day by day, so as to do good to others rather than in any way harm them.

Yet, still the man does not get the point. *"I've done that,"* he says, and you get the feeling that 'Yes, he's kept the letter of the law, but has he gone to the heart of it? Can he see that not killing is not just about taking life, but also about not destroying someone's inner self by constant sniping or backbiting or lack of love? Has he realised that avoiding adultery is about a lot more than not going to bed with the neighbour's wife, but is about a whole life of not betraying trust and fidelity and responsibility in any form? Has he grasped that stealing may involve taking away not just a person's property, but their dignity, their reputation, their peace of mind? And false evidence and neglect of mother and father - has he really, out of sheer love, always avoided giving a false impression about people, refused to join in gossip, and gratefully acknowledged all who, in some way, have helped him to be the person he had become, and to be where he stood that day?' And more than that had he really grasped that these importantly good things happen most easily, not when a person is concerned with self, or even most with other people, but with God. You cannot love God – really love God, and not want to behave to other people in these good, and Christlike, ways, out of love for them as well.

For this man, who came to Jesus, something was obviously getting in the way, and so Jesus next addresses this: *“Go, sell all your possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. Then, come and follow me.”*

The man just can't do this, and goes away with a heavy heart. Even the disciples are astonished by what Jesus has said. And I can understand their problem, because it is often suggested in scripture that God shows his approval for those who are righteous by rewarding them with success and wealth and prosperity. But if that was how it was, then how could having riches make it hard to enter the kingdom of heaven? And not only hard but impossible; as impossible as it would be to make a real full size, live, camel, go through the eye of an ordinary, everyday needle? In fact, it would have been easier to do this with a camel than for a rich person to be saved. (There have been many attempts to ease the difficult of this saying of Jesus – saying the eye of a needle was a low gate in the city wall, for example. But none of them stand up and all represent a running away from the hard truth of what Jesus is saying here: about the way in which we all let other things get in the way of a proper relationship with God)

For, you see, the reason why wealth is a bar to entry into the kingdom of heaven, the age to come, is because it creates such a powerful illusion of autonomy and self-sufficiency and independence. With wealth (and not just wealth of possessions – but wealth of power, wealth of status, wealth of specialised knowledge, wealth of connections, wealth of birth privilege), with the security of wealth of any kind we are that much more able to get our own way. More or less, we are able to preserve our own private space, protect our own interests, control our own time, do as we like. The rich can be independent – as long as their riches last. But this is no preparation for the time when God will rule and his will shall be done by all (*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*). No private empires, or petty fiefdoms, will then survive. And the poor will be better prepared for this because they will be more accustomed to having their will frustrated, and responding to what someone else requires.

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Eternal life is life as befits God, the God who so **loved** the world, the God who **gave** his only son. That is why self-concern and self-sufficiency and autonomy and life with God are so incompatible. So *“go, sell what you own”*, - get rid of the junk and clutter in your life, the baggage that you carry that gets in the way of truly loving God as you should and your neighbour as yourself – *‘and give the money to the poor’*, - give the time and energy, gifts and experience, then freed up to giving attention to where these things are really needed, all around you - *‘and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’*

But, of course, this is very hard for us. What hope can there be? The only hope, of course, is in God's extraordinary grace. The only hope for those who are not poor is that God may do the extraordinary and exceptional thing of saving a rich person, drawing her or him, you or me, to himself. But this requires over-time on God's part, a working all through the long night of Calvary, and beyond, that this might be so. Yet still a response is required from us.

For me one of the most deeply spiritual moments of the church year is when we gather on Ash Wednesday, and receive ,on our foreheads the sign of the cross in ash with the words: "*remember that you are dust and to dust you will return*". It is a call to then follow the 40 days of Lent as a time for us all to examine our own poverty and riches, our own autonomy and obedience, our own self-concern and our own concern for others, before the generous, self-giving, holy love of God. But that is one of the functions of our opening up our hearts in penitence and faith, in confession of sin and confession of faith, Sunday by Sunday as well.

Collect

O God, forasmuch as without you
we are not able to please you;
mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit
may in all things direct and rule our hearts;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Hebrews 4.12-end Jesus the Great High Priest

¹² Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

¹⁴ Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Mark 10.17-31 The Rich Man

¹⁷ As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother." ' ²⁰ He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' ²¹ Jesus, looking

at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' ²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' ²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

²⁸ Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' ²⁹ Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, ³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'