

THE RICH YOUNG RULER – St Luke 18: 18-27

On Wednesday this week, we celebrated the Feast of the Entry of the Mother of God into the Temple. This is not a feast which finds its historical base in the New Testament but rather in the Tradition of the Church. She is brought to the Temple by Joachim and Anna accompanied by virgins and given to the High Priest Zacharias in a kind of re-enactment of Exodus 40 where Moses was given instructions for the setting up of the tent and the Ark of the Covenant, which accompanies the Children of Israel on their wanderings. At a deeper level there is a very interesting contrast with the rich young ruler of today's Gospel. The three accounts in the Synoptic Gospels give slightly different versions of the event but the main points are the same. A rich young ruler comes to Jesus and the word 'good' is used either to address him or to ask what good thing he should do to inherit eternal life. Christ replies that he should keep the commandments of Moses and lists some of them. The young man is dissatisfied with the reply and yearns for a greater commitment to God. Jesus then says that if he wishes to be perfect he must sell all that he has and follow him. This unexpected reply utterly vanquishes him since he is unable to obey because of his great riches and he goes away deeply saddened.

The young ruler's behaviour contrasts so clearly with that of the Mother of God, who responds to the Archangel Gabriel, "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy word". It contrasts with the joy of the midweek feast as she enters the Temple as a sacrifice. In a liturgical context it is like the ordaining of the deacon who is brought through the Royal Doors into the sanctuary, the place of sacrifice, for the first time. Elsewhere in the Gospel we read of the calling of the disciples and we are astonished (perhaps to be honest, we are incredulous) as we are told that Jesus said to a man called Matthew, sitting at the tax office. "Follow me", and he immediately arose and followed him. Perhaps the clearest portrayal of the contrast between the young ruler and the above is the parable of the wise and the foolish virgins. The former are prepared for the arrival and call of God, the latter are most definitely not.

The story today has something essential to say to us about the life in Christ. In a very real sense there are the equivalent of the young man's riches in us in some form or other which prevent us from being perfect. You have no doubt heard it said on the feasts of the cross that the vertical bar represents our spiritual aspirations and the horizontal our earthly ones. Where they meet is tension, which we struggle with. That tension and those earthly attachments will be special for each one of us. Sometimes we will be blind to them and a personal revelation from God is required to show them to us. At other times we will know them only too well and pray that God will help us to overcome them and move on. But if we presume that this young man's journey is over and that his way to perfection or completeness is barred, then we form a wrong conclusion both about God and about the nature of our journey in Him.

In the first case we know that we are called to be fellow workers with God in our own salvation and that of the world, which are bound up together. We are assured of his continued work in us. What we are asked to do is to prepare ourselves so that he can act in us and through us with all the imperfections that we have. And most importantly, we must never abandon this goal no matter how much we fail him and ourselves. Cries like "Why have you fashioned me thus?" common to all of us at some point in our lives, do not help in directing our gaze towards where we need to go.

Then there is a misunderstanding about human weakness and perfection. 'Perfect' means something like becoming complete, accessing those riches within us both communally and

individually of which the Fathers speak, and of becoming our transfigured selves. St Paul writes of our willingness to serve God. "If the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not". Every act of service is somehow adequate in its inadequacy since God takes what is improperly formed but sincerely given and makes it complete in some way. This realisation is designed to keep us humble. It is God who is all in all but he honours our free gift.

There is a very clear sense in which Jesus' response to the young man is appropriate medicine for him. He lays out the dimensions which service to God can actually reach, the giving away of everything, Thus he gives him something to aspire to for the rest of his life. He is also given a lesson in humility. We too are in that struggle of trying to prepare ourselves to be responsive to the voice of God which comes to each of us in a unique way. One of the medicines that the Church gives us at this time of year is the Nativity Fast, which began on 15th November. The rules are clear about the nature of fasting but I ask you to be wise and discerning in what you take upon yourselves. St Seraphim of Sarov was always speaking about damaging the soul through excessive fasting and was famous for putting food in his nuns' pockets for when they got hungry. Let us be hard with ourselves but take on something that we can hold to, be that ever so little. Let us bear in mind the saying of the Lord "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath". May God grant us to use the Fast through his guidance to draw closer to him and to experience the freedom of being ready to respond simply, sincerely and positively when his call comes to us and take on the sacrifice like the Mother of God who left all behind her as she entered the Temple.

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