

## THE RICH YOUNG RULER - Luke 18:18-27

Today's gospel of the rich young ruler is one of several at this time of year which deal realistically and uncompromisingly with the subject of money and material possessions or rather, our attitude to them. Last week's gospel was about the parable of the rich man whose land brought forth abundantly and who decided in consequence to build larger barns and store his produce. His soul told him to take his rest and eat, drink and be merry. As a result, he lost his spiritual attentiveness, putting his trust in his own achievements and not realising that his world, like that of the prophet Job could be overturned in a second, and he would not be ready when his Master was ready to return and his life was required of him. It is no accident that these readings about wealth fall within the Christmas fast. Luke chapter 12, from which last week's reading came, is littered with warnings about money and the dangers of being too attached to it. "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions", "Seek first his kingdom and all these things shall be added to you", "do not seek what you are to eat or drink", "do not be anxious about your life." It is so easy to lose our spiritual perspective on wealth in a second, as it is on the other good gifts of life, and become over-attached. The fast is here to help us recover our sense of the presence of God and be prepared for the inner voice which will speak to us about the next stage of our journey towards God.

In the Gospel of today the rich young ruler meets that voice not in a quiet way, but directly from Jesus himself and he backs off because, like ourselves, his heart which is attached to his riches prevents him from obeying the command of Christ to sell all that he has and follow him. Now let us be extremely practical from the outset about money. The Gospel does not say that we should not make realistic material provision for the future for ourselves and our family. We would be both unwise and irresponsible to ourselves and our children if we did not use all the means at our disposal to do that - financial planning, budgeting investments etc. But it does say how hard it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God and the young ruler is a good example. He is clearly a very devout man: he keeps all the commandments and looks after his parents but he is still dissatisfied within and he cannot make the supreme sacrifice which will meet his deep inner spiritual need. How similar we are to him in our own individual ways.

Now the two paths are somehow symbolic of the moral life and the monastic life; the path of obeying out of practice, keeping the rules of the Church and the fuller commitment of ourselves to Christ from our hearts. Of course, we are asked to give of our possessions whether material or from our innate talents, especially in this time of fasting before the Feast of the Nativity when God divested himself of his heavenly divinity and took the form of a man for our sakes. But the deeper call to each of us is to the monastic or ascetic life like to that young man, "My son, give me your heart. I shall fulfil all things." We cannot help but identify very closely with him. He is young, enthusiastic, wishing to serve God and he receives an answer which sums him up spiritually and must reduce him to tears. But if we examine our hearts too we all have a stumbling block, something to which we are deeply attached which prevents us from seeing God and ourselves with the clarity which would give us inner freedom, inner peace and greater joy. To a similar extent we are like that young man; we are blocked; we cannot move forward. We are like the disciples shouting, "who can be saved?" or like St Paul lamenting in his letter to the Romans that he is a wretched man because he actually does the very things he hates. Now, it is important to say that if we are like this we are in one sense indeed blessed. The Fathers tell us that the most blessed state is that of seeing our own failings. There is also considerable reassurance in today's Gospel. The disciples see a very dedicated young man reduced by Jesus to great sadness in one sentence and they despair. Christ quickly consoles them with the promise. "What is impossible with man is possible with God." So there is hope for us and the young man, who are somehow stuck on our own particular path. And the fast period is the time and the opportunity when God can come to shed some light which will enable us to change our direction and move forward. There is an interesting text which the priest and deacon utter as they put on their left cuff during the vesting. "Give me understanding that I may learn thy commandments."



Only by God's enlightenment, the gift of the Holy Spirit to each of us in the form of wisdom or understanding, can we hope to move forward into the freedom and joy that we desire deeply within. May god grant us that gift in the remaining weeks of the fast so that we may experience the truth of knowing in our hearts that "what is impossible with man is possible with God".