**THE RICH YOUNG RULER – St 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. Like mine your computers have no doubt been bombarded with tempting Black Friday special offers, often not so special if you compare them with earlier prices, designed to make us part with our cash on purchases both necessary and unnecessary. Normally around this time we would have read the parable about the rich fool whose land brought forth abundantly and who decided in consequence to build larger barns in which to store his steadily increasing 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 life was required of him. It is no accident that these readings about wealth fall within the Advent fast and are particularly relevant when the shops are normally full to bursting point and spending hits a yearly high. Luke chapter 12, from which this parable comes, is littered with warnings about money and possessions and the dangers of being attached to them. “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 and drink”, “do not be anxious about your life.” It is so easy to lose our spiritual perspective on wealth especially in our aggressively materialistic and avaricious society where a person is measured and respected by how much he owns and the only god is mammon. All this takes place at the expense of our spiritual wellbeing and the fast is here to redirect us back to our real home, the presence of God, where we can hope to hear his voice again and what He has to say to us.

In the Gospel of today the rich young ruler meets that voice not in a quiet way but directly from the Lord 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 – no small sacrifice for him or for anybody. Few of us have the courage of a person like Matthew the Poor (Matta el-Meskeen) who sold his pharmacy business and went to live as a hermit in a cave in the Egyptian desert, later becoming the head of a monastery. But 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, our family and those for whom we have responsibility. We would be both unwise and irresponsible to ourselves and our families if we did not use all the means at our disposal to do that – financial planning, investments, budgeting to name but a few.

It does say, however, 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 since he keeps all the commandments and looks after his parents but he is still dissatisfied inside himself and he cannot make the supreme sacrifice which will meet his deep inner need and that is a situation which we all share with him in our own individual ways.

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The two paths are somehow symbolic of the moral life and the spiritual life: the path of obeying out of practice, keeping the rules of the Church and the fuller commitment of ourselves to Christ from the heart. Of course, we are asked to give of our possessions whether material or from our innate talents to those around us who are in need, 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 and became a servant to us. But the deeper call to each of us is to the ascetic life like to that young man, “My son, give me your heart. I shall fulfil all things”. We cannot help but identify with this young ruler. He is young and enthusiastic, wishing to serve God and he receives an answer which sums him up spiritually and must reduce him to tears. He is like St Augustine who cries to God, “Save me but not yet”. If we examine our hearts we too have a stumbling block, something to which we are deeply attached which prevents us from moving forward and seeing God with greater clarity and freedom, inner peace and greater joy. In a sense we are like the Apostle Paul lamenting in his epistle to the Romans that he serves God with his mind but sin with his body.

In one sense if we are like this we are indeed blessed since the Fathers tell us that the most blessed state is that of seeing our own failings and we know that it did not take St Augustine long to abandon his adulterous relationship and become a loyal servant of the Church, eventually becoming Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. It is comforting also to see how quickly Christ consoles his disciples who despair at the harsh words uttered to the young man with the cry, “Then who can be saved?” He replies to them, “What is impossible with man is possible with God”.

For us, lower members of Christ’s body, it is difficult to find more comforting and reassuring words than what we have heard in the epistle read to us just now from St Paul’s letter to the Church at Ephesus. “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, made us alive together with Christ and raised us up with him and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus….. For by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God.” Only by dwelling on what God has done for mankind and each one of us personally in Christ and by trying to understand more deeply the extent of his love for us can we draw closer to God and respond with love for Him and those around us. May God grant us that gift during the fast.

***Oxford 28th November 2021***