

The Rich Young Ruler

Amos 5: 6-7, 10-15, Hebrews 4:12-16, Mark 10: 17-31

Mark in our Gospel reading this morning, as he so often does, confronts us with the demands of discipleship, and today we are presented with the story of the rich man who could not abandon his possessions for the sake of eternal life.

The combination of wealth and generosity, money and abundant sharing, riches and giving them away are at the heart of Jesus' teaching; he teaches us to give away love and invites us to lay up our treasures in heaven.

Before we look at examples of what this might mean for us, let's take a closer look at the story.

Mark tells us that as Jesus was setting out on a journey a man ran up and knelt before Jesus and asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. There is nothing to suggest that this was anything other than a pious and polite action, showing Jesus respect, but in his enthusiasm, he starts flattering Jesus by calling him 'Good teacher'. Jesus was sympathetic towards the man and took kindly to him, but he did poke a hole in the flattery and challenged the young man. 'Don't focus on me. Focus on God and God alone is good.'

When Jesus recites five of the Commandments to the man, he assures Jesus that since he was a youth he has observed them. The Commandments Jesus quoted were: Do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not defraud. Honour your father and mother. It's interesting to note that Jesus quoted the last six, numbers 5 to 10, and even then put the fifth last; but 'do not defraud' has somewhat surprisingly replaced 'do not covet', may be this was an

oblique reference as to how the man might have acquired his wealth? Also note, Jesus quoted only the Commandments concerned with human relationship; He did not refer to those concerning relationship with God.

Jesus was not hostile and did not want to embarrass the man, but said "You lack one thing; go and sell what you own, and give money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me". This was not the answer he was hoping for so Mark tells us 'he went away grieving for he had many possessions'.

The man may have avoided doing bad things to others, but that is not the same as doing something good for them. Jesus was asking the man to do something positive for people, to make their lives better, to share his possessions with others.

Jesus had tested the man, much as God had tested Abraham and his son Isaac. Unlike Abraham who put God first, and was prepared to kill his son, this man was not willing to part with his possessions. His approach was based on self-interest rather than on a single-hearted love of God that is prepared to commit everything.

It is important that we understand that the command to sell everything is not to be taken literally. It is part of Aramaic hyperbole or exaggeration in order to make a point. As is Jesus' further explanation to the disciples when he told them '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.'

The disciples were astonished with Jesus' comment, because if the rich cannot be saved, then who can be? Jesus answered "With man it is impossible, but not with God. All things are possible with God". Seeking to obtain eternal life, like seeking to acquire any other possession, does not work. We can neither bargain with God nor

manipulate God. Eternal life is a pure and undeserved gift from God. And since that is so, we can turn our gaze from heaven and stop wondering what awaits us there. Instead, we can turn our eyes to this world, and follow Jesus wherever he takes us.

That brings me to some thoughts as to where that might be. On Friday a week past some of us represented Christ Church at a conference organised by the Bethany Christian Trust. The first speaker was a Scottish Cabinet Minister who plied us with figures which I interpreted as being an attempt to demonstrate what good works the Scottish Government are doing to transform the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. I found it sad that these folk are being treated as a football for political points scoring, but I guess it ever was. By significant contrast I was much heartened by the other eminent speakers, representing charitable organisations, who during the day had the common theme that it is society, not Government, that need to be working and volunteering to make those transformations.

We heard that, currently, it is common culture, for those in need to turn to the State agencies, be it for housing, benefits, health, child protection and so one. But invariably, one agency merely refers the enquirer to an alternative agency and once they have been through the whole gamut of agencies and some six months later the problems have not been addressed. I have to say that it sounds so familiar for members of this congregation who have been hospitalised over recent months, having to wait weeks and even months for ‘care packages’ to be organised before being allowed home.

To quote Ian Gordon, the CEO of Bethany, “the State is sick and there is no money to pay for a vet! There needs to be a major cultural change and when there is a problem, instead of automatically saying ‘**They** need to sort it’, ask yourself ‘Who is **they?**’ – and then answer ‘It’s me!’

Who is going to help the aged lady get up and dressed? It's me.

Who is going to offer to look after a child whilst single Mum has to go for a hospital appointment? It's me.

Who is going to befriend a family in crisis and help prevent children being taken into care? It's me.

Who is going to mentor an ex-offender and help them integrate back into society?
It's me.

I heard on more than one occasion on that day that being on Morningside there may not be so many calls of this nature compared with other parts of Edinburgh or other parts of Scotland or the UK, which is probably true in some respects, but we would be mistaken in thinking that there is no social poverty on our door step.

Whilst many of us are, and would be, willing to respond 'It's me', we do often find ourselves hide bound by bureaucratic red tape and the inherent risk of litigation if something does not go to plan. I just pray that the encumbrance of this culture will also change so that our Christian instinct to go more freely where Jesus would have us be and that we can better give of our time and love to help transform the lives of those less fortunate than ourselves.

In the words of the prayer of St Francis "For it is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that that we are born again to eternal life."

Amen