

ST AIDAN'S 8.30am and ST ALBAN'S 10.00am

Sunday 14th October, 2018. Pentecost 21

Job 23:9, Psalm 22:1-15, Hebrews 5:12-16, Mark10:17-31

Today's gospel story from Mark starts with a young man who rushes up as Jesus is setting out for Jerusalem, about 120Kms from where he was staying in Capernaum. With this intrusion, we meet a man who does not lack in confidence. There seems to have been a seriousness and urgency in his wanting to put a question to Jesus. From what Matthew and Luke tell us about the man in their versions of the episode, he was rich and a ruler of some kind, probably, it is thought, a young, up and coming leader of his local synagogue. Do his wealth and position give him that sense of entitlement that such people often have, that enables him to butt in like this? But for all that, he is not an unattractive young man. He is respectful, courteous and sounds genuine in the question he puts to Jesus and we note that he kneels before him. Why would he be asking "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" of this poor, itinerant teacher on the verge of being regarded as on the wrong side of the law? He has some sense of the person of Jesus in calling him "good teacher", even if Jesus uses this as a platform to come back to him, quite confrontingly, saying that only God is good.

One commentator says that right from the beginning, the story fairly bristles with difficulties of exegesis and interpretation. So what do we make of the story and what does it have to say to us in our situation?

Our reading comes from the 10th chapter of Mark. Chapters 8, 9 and the earlier part of 10 up to where we started at verse 17, contain the predictions that Jesus made to his disciples about his suffering, death and resurrection. After each prediction, the disciples' responses reveal their misunderstanding of Jesus' mission and their part in it and Jesus tries to teach them what it means to follow him. Late in chapters 8 and 9, Jesus makes it clear that following him means denying oneself, following the example of his own self-sacrificial service, losing one's life in order to save it. So this was the context in which the disciples heard the intrusion from the rich young ruler as they grappled with what the master was foretelling about himself and what it might mean for them.

"Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

In reply to the young man, Jesus speaks first of only God being good – reference to the first half of the Decalogue, the ten commandments, before going on and spelling out in loose form, the second half, those referring to how we treat people. "You know the commandments: Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honour your father and mother." The young man's reply is sadly moving: "Teacher, all these things I have kept since I was a boy." Now Jesus escalates what is required and subverts any sense of satisfaction with "Go, sell all you have and give to the poor. Then follow me!" Admirable as the young man's conscientious, respectable life had been, he had missed the point and the heart of the commandments.

Jesus stands on its head what these good Jews believed. Jewish morality saw riches as a clear sign of a man rewarded by God, honoured and blessed. So it was easy to think that this young man's riches were proof of fine character and favour with God. It is a sad story. Simply unable to choose the way to what he so badly wants, the young man walks away sorrowfully. We are told that Jesus looked at him and loved him. It is hard to think Jesus did not feel sorrow too as the man walked away.

You feel it is in sadness that Jesus went on to turn this thinking on its head, explaining to his disciples how hard it is for a man who has money to enter the Kingdom of God. The word used here for

money is “chremata”, defined by Aristotle as “all those things of which the value is measured by coinage”. When the disciples expressed their astonishment, Jesus repeated his saying in a slightly different way: “How difficult it is for those who have put their trust in riches to enter the Kingdom.”

He uses that nice, exaggerated picture to make the point, the ridiculously impossible picture of a camel going through the eye of a needle. It may well have had a double impact on his hearers as in most huge city gates, there was inserted a small sized door to give access to late arrivals at night once the city gates were locked. This door was commonly known as “the needle” but even the tiniest of camels, on its knees and being shoved hard from behind could not possibly enter. So Jesus makes his point effectively twice.

Jesus saw clearly the pitfalls of prosperity and material possessions. It is easy for us to say we are not rich because we know people around us whose wealth far exceeds ours and who by flaunting their conspicuous consumption relieve us of recognising that in the greater scheme of things, we are well off. It also becomes easy for us to think in terms of price instead of value and to lose the perspective on the precious things that are beyond price. The young man went away to safeguard his temporal interests and thereby jeopardised his eternal interests.

What is at the core of this passage? The tradition of Israel, and its hope, have at their heart, good news for the poor. Riches so easily blind us to the vision of the kingdom and make us deaf to the cry of the poor. We need to be set free from them to live the life of love and compassion. One commentator says that the deceit of wealth is almost inescapable, the burden of guilt impossible. We can be party to taking more than our share of this world’s goods individually, corporately and nationally. I ask myself “Is my life good news for the poor?”. I often fear it is not. I really am confronted by the questions I find myself having to face from this gospel. I only enjoy possessions as a steward looking after some part of God’s creation that still belongs to God, not to me. Am I defrauding others, not wilfully, but by consuming too much, more than my fair share, not living more modestly than I already do, and giving what I save to the poor?

I participate each year along with a couple of others from St Alban’s, in the making of birthing kits for women in the poorest parts of the world and I dutifully chip in my \$3 per kit that I make up to pay for the contents and the transport. I am so humbled by these kits. There is a square metre of black plastic of the kind we use for bin liners. It is so small that it is not accurate to say it is for the woman to lie on. It is so small, that it would only protect the woman’s body from contact with the ground from knees to waist during the birth. Then there is a sliver of soap, smaller than you get at any motel and that you normally throw away after one use. Five tiny swabs of gauze are included to wipe the new born baby’s eyes, a mini scalpel to cut the cord and some tiny pieces of string to tie it. I spend more at a \$2 everything shop on a card and gift wrap for a baby gift for friends and relatives here who have the safe environment of an excellent hospital of choice and a good health system to care for mother and baby, not forgetting to include and cater for the father at the birth. Am I following Jesus and really giving to the poor?

Recent research has linked clinical depression and debilitating anxiety with being poor. Is my choice of a more upmarket lifestyle rather than disciplining myself to live on less and give more to the poor, colluding in the disempowerment of their lives? It is a confronting question if we have the courage to ask it of ourselves.

A preacher who has published a sermon on this passage says that when people ask her if they too are required to sell all their possessions and give the money to the poor, she answers “Maybe!”. She goes on to say a close reading of this passage unsettles our view of discipleship by demanding that it

consist of radically following Jesus, rather than simply following the rules. One of the goals of following Jesus is life in the Kingdom that Jesus came to bring. In John 13 Jesus calls on us to heed his new commandment, that we love one another, just as he has loved us.

To try to wrestle with the application of the story to our own lives, we need to stand up against advertising such as I received this last week “Win the holiday you deserve” or “pamper yourself” ... Why? We need to pay attention to what Jesus said to his disciples when the young man had sadly gone away. He teaches that wealth has a way of distracting people from seeking the Kingdom of God. Peter almost wails at Jesus reminding him that some of them had left all to follow him, doing just what the rich young man had failed to do. Jesus promised that they would receive in abundance what they had given up and that while his followers may be persecuted in the here and now, they will be vindicated with abundance beyond imagining.

So there are questions that we need to ask ourselves. Are we following the rules while seeking to gain the whole world, or are we radically seeking to follow Jesus? The passage challenges the notion that discipleship will be easy, comfortable or complacent. We need to let the Kingdom of God break into our world and transform our service now. Where our treasure is, there will our heart be also.