

## Jesus meets the Rich Man

Our Gospel this morning has a very tough message. It is even tougher for us than it was for those in Jesus' day. Comparatively we are richer than even the rich man in the story. If Jesus talks to him about his possessions what is he saying to us? It is strange isn't it? In a society where people are severely beaten up for their mobile phone, the small amount of cash in their wallet, their trainers, their car, where a policeman is mown down and murdered for fear of being caught with a stolen van, yes we have far more, yet somehow our society expects and wants a lot more. And it seems that the more we have, the tougher this passage is seen to be.

Here was a young, wealthy, citizen, (a ruler in one gospel account) with a good reputation. He approaches Jesus and asks politely for his attention. The young man had, he thought, followed the law and had never knowingly broken any of the Jewish rules. In his view, he was earning his way into heaven. He thought he was doing OK and wanted Jesus to confirm, even affirm that what he was doing was right. Was he on target for heaven? "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Good teacher!" "Why do you call me good?" replies Jesus. Why does the young man call him good? Was it flattery, a calculated gesture, a bit of posturing? And why does Jesus object to being called "good"? Does Jesus think the man is trying to flatter him? Trying to wheedle around him? Possibly! Jesus certainly wasn't interested in any kind of flannel or flattery, no interest in social etiquette. His answer suggests that something is wrong with the question itself. Once you imagine that eternal life is something you inherit or earn by being good, you have lost focus on God, you are off God's track. No one is inherently and truly good except God. No one is "good enough" to inherit eternal life and entering the kingdom is not about "being good" in the first place. Here is the crux of the story. The young man's response, so he thought, would be enough. I am doing these things! I am following the rules! I am keeping to commandments! Yes I am a being good. I am on the way to heaven aren't I?

Clearly not! Not according to Jesus' response! Jesus didn't mock the young man, or treat him as insincere or arrogant. We are told that Jesus looked straight at him and loved him. The young man, asking the harder question, seeking a deeper answer than just following the commandments he had been taught, gained the love of Jesus. To me this is amazing. Jesus showed love to this young man seeking answers. Surely that's a comfort to any of us struggling with and asking those bigger questions!

At the same time Jesus actually goes for the jugular! A strange way he has of showing love! No congratulations for the way the boy has lived his life so far just an uncompromising demand for a complete revolution in his life: go, sell...give...follow me! No beating about the bush, no messing around. The young man was relying on his own efforts. His wealth meant he was

cushioned from hardship, removed from relying on anyone else. It gave him the ability to face life on HIS terms. By selling his wealth that protection would be removed. Without his money he would have to rely on others. Maybe it is harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God because that rich person is used to relying on what they have whereas a person with nothing knows they have nothing. A person with nothing comes to God and says will you take me as I am. They have no other bargaining power. Yet a person who has great wealth is tempted to come to God and bargain with it.

The rich man would not be the only one shocked by Jesus' pronouncement. Imagine the gasps of horror! Given that wealth was considered a sign of blessing in the first century, Jesus' words must have taken a bit of digesting if they ever could be digested at all! Given our modern day approach to wealth can we ever digest these words?

What if entry to the kingdom depends in part on being willing to give away our riches? Was he that serious? Would he not be setting the bar way higher than us churchgoers are willing to go? This would be serious? Churches would empty overnight! How serious are you? Am I? What would you give up or get rid of, or be prepared never to have for the sake of your place in God's kingdom? Where are our priorities? On what is our heart set?

In the 1998 film *A Civil Action*. John Travolta plays a small town lawyer who investigates the case of a leather production company accused of causing the pollution responsible for several fatal cases of leukemia, but was the main employer for the area. Unfortunately the lawyer and his small firm is no match for the tremendous legal resources of the company and this destroys him. In one classic scene, the lawyer stands before a bankruptcy judge and declares that 14 dollars and a portable radio are all his possessions he has left in the world. The judge responds in amazement, "Where are all the things you should accumulate in life in order to give you your identity?"

This one line speaks volumes. Where are your things you have accumulated in life to mark your identity? This is exactly how our world evaluates an individual's worth. Money and things equals our identity! Jesus' words, also speak volumes. Money and things do not equal identity. Christ does that. We give ourselves away for Christ and we establish our identity.

However much we try we cannot change who we are. No amount of plastic surgery or signing up to self-help courses will change you or me because inside us will still be you or me and we are all flawed. Every one of us is capable of good and evil, we have the capacity to be horrible to each other as well as to make the kindest and greatest of sacrifices. What is this Gospel telling me? Maybe that unless I am willing to come to Jesus and say here I am, I bring nothing with me, then nothing is going to happen. Jesus is interested in the real you and me. Here Jesus is cutting through the flannel that makes it very hazardous and very challenging.

I believe that our gospel story asks us to think again about the way our world is, to challenge our assumptions about it and our understanding of how it works. Wealth creates many problems and I think that the reference to camels and eyes of needles challenges us to think very carefully about our approach to wealth. I think there is another point too. Jesus stretches us. We move one step forward in faith and he asks us to take another. We show signs of progress and he shows that he wants more. Jesus is not for the easier option, the smoother ride. The status quo doesn't seem to exist in Jesus' vocabulary. He is never satisfied with where we are! So should we be? Can we keep on taking the next step, keep on growing, asking those bigger and harder questions, stretching ourselves to our limit? Jesus' love is shown in his desire to make us reach for more. In love he asks everything from us. Doesn't he have a right to? After all that's what he gave for us.

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