

Putting God First

I still smile at the story, I have used many times, of the two archbishops a RC and Anglican who both died and on reaching the pearly gates Peter ushers them into a waiting room. They kicked their heels for an hour or so and then a pretty girl arrived and was ushered straight in. The two Archbishops protested at this as to why a youngster should get preferential treatment over men of their status. Peter looks up at them and says: "That young girl has just crashed in her sports car which she learned to drive a year ago. In that short year she has put the fear of God into more people than your graces have in the whole of your careers."

Drivers frighten me, with some near misses, when they speed in their attempt to get to the front of the queue. What is it with the obsession with coming first? Who has the right to be first? The first motorist there, the one with the biggest vehicle, the driver with the strongest willpower, greatest cheek, biggest mouth, fastest driving – who?

What is it with the obsession to have the finest and the best, the fastest, the most expensive, the biggest, loudest or quietest, the sleekest, the most sophisticated, the most up-to-date and, of course, the first. Not only on the roads but, it seems, everywhere, an order is created. Strict divisions exist where people are pigeonholed, labeled and then have their place in a pecking order. Parameters are identified, boundaries drawn up and places allocated.

As Christians we know that God alone has the right to be at the front of every queue and the passage from Mark needs to be thought about carefully. It really is a challenging Gospel.

Mark 10:21 is an amazing verse: Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him. Have you ever wondered what it would be like to have Jesus looking at you? What do you picture the look on Jesus' face to be? What words would come with his expression? In studying this passage we see a young man who desperately wants to find out what it takes to have eternal life. So he runs to Jesus, who he calls a Good Teacher, and asks his question. Jesus told him what he expected to hear. Obey the commandments. Simple enough for this rich young man was a Jew and would have been taught the commandments from a young age. Jesus looked at him and loved him. Not surprising really because here was a young man, (on his knees we are told) who actually dared to ask Jesus the right sort of question. He didn't want anything from Jesus, as so many did, he didn't want Jesus to do anything for him. What he wanted to know was what he needs to do to inherit eternal life.

But isn't the second part to Jesus' answer a contradiction of the loving look on Jesus' face? "Sell everything you have and give it to the poor – follow me" Imagine the young man's face! Imagine his reaction! Energy and enthusiasm must have drained in an instance. He left Jesus very sad. However lovingly Jesus may have said it, he knew that what he said was going to be very tough to take.

Both the young man and Jesus' disciples were not expecting this. Did Jesus not realise how much the young man would have to give up? Of course he did. He knew the young

man's circumstances. He knew how hard he would take it. The disciples were left amazed and confused. They believed wealth to be a sign of God's blessing. Wealthy Pharisees and Sadducees were seen as holy people. Former Archbishop, George (now Lord) Carey said, in a sermon in Wells Cathedral (*I Believe (1991) pp 17-19*), that Jesus threw a spanner in the works when he answered the young man's question: How much will it cost? It wasn't the young man saying: I'll follow you on condition I can stay in bed till 8.00' and so on. It was Jesus making unconditional demands: 'Let go of your riches, your fortune, family, and lifestyle – everything and then come and follow me!' Carey noted that Jesus did not and does not want anybody to play at being a Christian. He said that the young man may have enjoyed dashing across the desert on his 3.5 superior-charged, 2-carb camel but the danger was that all this would get in the way and Christ says. 'Come and let that all be second best.' Interestingly Carey believes that too many think that Christianity is about 'thou shall not' whereas it is, in reality, about 'what can we do?'

Much debate has focused on what Jesus was referring to when he spoke of 'camels passing through the eye of a needle' but the point is clear, isn't it? It is impossible for anyone to inherit eternal life APART from God. With God anything is possible. Jesus is telling His disciples that what they own, what they say and do will get them nowhere, except by the grace of God. "At this the disciples were completely amazed and asked one another, 'Who then can be saved?' Jesus looked straight at them and answered, 'This is impossible for man but not for God; everything is possible for God.' (vv 26-27)

The Gospel tells us clearly that the disciples were amazed. And we should be too. We need to think carefully about it. Jesus is not criticising our worldly possessions, big or small as they may be; he is criticising us if they hold us back from putting God and himself first. We need the freedom to put God first, freedom to follow Jesus. He is looking straight at us, loving us, giving us the invitation to free up ourselves from everything and put him first. No half hearted attempts, no half measures, no going part way and giving up, no 'well we will when it suits, or when we can, or when we feel like it, or when it doesn't affect us too much' but just putting God first ///// Completely.

Tony Campolo in his book, *Let Me Tell You a Story (2000) pp 104-105*, recites a minister's true story of a man who stood up in a mid-week prayer service at his church and gave a testimony: "I was at King's Cross Station, in Sydney Australia, waiting at traffic lights to change when someone tugged on my jacket. When I turned round this shabby looking man looked at me and asked, 'Sir! If you were to die tonight where would spend eternity? That question haunted me for weeks. I could get no rest as it came back to me time and time again. I had to find an answer. I found it in becoming a Christian."

In the minister's story another man gave exactly the same testimony a couple of years later, in the same place and a couple of years after that the minister found himself in Sydney and purposefully went to Kings Cross station looking for this 'derelict man'. While searching for him, he felt a tug on his jacket and he turned round. It was obviously the same man but before he said anything the minister said: "I know what you are going to say. You're going to ask if I was to die tonight, where would I spend eternity?"

The man looked amazed but the minister explained how he knew. Reduced to tears the man said: "Mister, some eight years ago I was a drunk. Somehow I got to give my life to Jesus. I am uneducated, I don't know how to say much or do much. So I went around asking people this question. I have been doing it for eight years, mister, and today is the first day I had any idea I was doing any good at all."

Campolo believes the story shows how Jesus' accepts everyone, irrespective of being well-polished, well-educated, highly intellectual or immensely skillful, and expects we faithfully do what we can to tell people about Christ. In the context of our theme today, I think we should also focus on that haunting and challenging question the shabby-looking man, at the station, had been subjecting innocent passers-by to for eight years (and probably many more): "If you were to die tonight, where would you spend eternity?"

I read the story recently of the local newspaper reporter who was interviewing a couple who had been married for sixty years, "What's the secret to such a long and happy marriage?" He asked. "Well," replied the husband, "it's like this. The man makes all the big decisions and the woman makes the little ones." "Does that really work?" said the reporter. "Oh yes," replied the husband, "Sixty years and so far not one big decision."

In this Gospel Jesus forces us to make the big decision. Often we think of our relationship with God as something that will take care of itself, or as something that God will take care of for us. But there is always a decision for us. For example in Revelations 3:20 we read: "Listen! I stand at the door and knock: if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in his house and eat with him, and he will eat with me." Jesus is standing at the door asking to have a meal. He is the one taking the initiative to spend time with you and me. He is already and always will be at the door to my life (and yours), asking for some time just to be with you, to eat with you. What we have to do is to open the door and keep it open. That is the challenge. I, like each one of you, has the creator of the universe, the giver of life, Almighty God standing at my door, knocking. Am I prepared to put him first, invite him in each day? Am I up to making that big decision and taking on that challenge? Are you?

In George Carey's sermon I quoted earlier, he refers to a sign he understood used to be in the outback of Australia. It read: "Choose your rut carefully, you will be in it for 2000 miles!" We need to think carefully about the questions I have posed this morning and our responses. The implications are crucial. They are long lasting, hopefully for eternity.