

Sun 11 October, 2015

*A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Dr Colleen O'Reilly SCP: Vicar of St George's Malvern.
Readings: Amos 5.6-7, 10-15 Psalm 90.12-17 Hebrews 4.12-16 Mark 10.17-31*

Jesus is on his way up from the Jordan valley to Jerusalem when a man runs up, kneels in front of him and asks what sounds like a sensible enough question.

The man is honouring Jesus as someone able to give him his answer, but the man's question shows that he does not yet understand Jesus at all.

'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' the man asks. He wants Jesus to tell him what he must *do* to share in the life that only God can give. It is the wrong question. And the man will not understand the right answer when he is given it.

'You know what God wants of you,' says Jesus, 'to keep the commandments that make for a just and good community. No murdering people, no taking what is not yours, no lying, no cheating, no refusing to honour your family responsibilities.'

For a rich person, in Jesus' day and even today in too many places, these are all crimes, all destructive behaviours, the rich can get away with. But this man has kept the commandments; he may be rich but he is just in his dealings with others.

And that's the problem it seems. He is rich. He has many possessions. He has an inheritance here on earth that would be the envy of many. Clearly God has blessed him and yet here is Jesus telling him to give way his abundance! No wonder the man is shocked

If he gives away his wealth, he will be a poor man; he will be one of the least, the disregarded in his world, as the poor still are in ours. The man cannot *do* it, even though *what to do* is what he asked Jesus to tell him. He wants to do it, but he cannot. The man goes away grieving because he cannot do the one thing Jesus has told him will free him to inherit treasure in heaven.

Notice, Jesus does not run after the man as he walks away; he does not try to bargain with him. No pleading: 'could you manage to give away some of it, just to start with?' No, Jesus does none of that. Jesus loves this good man, Mark tells us, and Jesus acts out of love for him not Jesus' need to win the man to his side, or feel has made yet another gain for God, for the sake of it.

Jesus simply shares in the man's grief. Jesus is willing to feel the man's distress rather than relieve his own by cajoling the man into a bargain that falls short of the man's deepest longings. I have a hunch Jesus stood quite still, not speaking for some time, as the man walked away. Perhaps he watched until he could see him no longer.

What Jesus wanted the good man to understand was that there was *nothing to be done* to inherit eternal life? The treasure God offers is not earned by human effort, it must simply be received.

There is no other way.

The rich man was challenged to clear the one obstacle to his own openness to God. For him, the protection from vulnerability his possessions provided was a barrier to being able to come before God like the little children of no importance Jesus has earlier praised as role models.

For you and for me, it may also be true that our social status, our material comfort, our determination to be in charge of ourselves could be the 'many possessions' that keeps God at bay in our lives. We who achieve so

much by our own hard work can find it hard to accept that what matters most, the life God alone can give us, is not gained by our efforts.

Jesus explains this shocking reversal of expectations to the disciples. 'How hard for the wealthy,' he says without judgement but much compassion. How hard for them; easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle! Easier for that to happen than for someone shored up by the social hardware of success to allow themselves to be indebted to God for the one longed for thing which no success will ever gain them.

What is that deepest longing, the one thing worth everything but which money cannot buy? It is eternal life, the life of God shared with us now, shared in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the human face of God.

So, what about us then, the disciples wonder? They look back to their own situation. 'We've given up all that we possessed,' they remind Jesus; 'we've given up family and work and followed you. Are you telling us that it is all for no gain?'

Not so, says Jesus. What you have given up will be restored to you a hundred fold in the household of faith, in the community of the Church.

Mark's gospel comes from and speaks to a Christian community living under persecution. In the second half of the first century, the Christians of Rome feared the knock at the door, the betrayal in the night, the loss of everything, even life itself for the sake of faithfully following Jesus, risen Christ.

Even today, there are Christians living this terror, this gospel as they are persecuted. Never pray for the Church throughout the world without praying for them. Pray for an end to their trials and if not an end, the courage to trust God even in the face of such appalling suffering; pray that they may die in the spirit of Jesus who offered up his life rather than renounce the God of his, and our salvation.

'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible,' says Jesus. While we cling to wanting to achieve or earn our standing with God, our share in God's life, we will have our hands full with whatever is actually stopping us. Only empty hands can have placed in them the inheritance that cannot be earned. Only those willing to accept God's shocking reversal of our values— our notions of who and what is important— begin to open themselves to what those without have known all along.

Those without 'many possessions' readily see that the treasure being offered them is truly a priceless gift. And it just as well that is priceless, since they have nothing to offer God in exchange except a grateful heart. It's all God wants. It's all God longs for – our loving gratitude and our readiness to love others as we love ourselves in light of God's love for us.

What it takes to empty our hands, our hearts, ourselves, will be different for each of us. So, what might that be for you?

The disciples were greatly astounded when Jesus said it would be easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle than to enter the realm of God. Of course, it was typical hyperbole on Jesus' part. It's a wonderful image to tease apart our locked up thinking.

And, with God it IS possible for that camel to fit through that needle's eye. It can be done. God does it daily for us, and with us. It may be a sudden event that turns our world upside down in the great reversal of the world's values God calls us to embrace; it may take years of daily emptying of ourselves as we slowly wake up to God's reality and cease creating our own.

But here's the rub: once the camel has been through the eye of that needle the camel is changed forever.

Jesus looked at his friends and said: For mortals it is impossible to do anything to gain the fullness of life God alone gives, but not for God; for God all things are possible, providing only that we mortals are willing to be changed in the process.