

Sermon :

Our Gospel passage for this morning tells the well-known story of the rich young man and his encounter with Jesus. Clearly, it's a key story for the early church, for it is to be found in each of the synoptic gospels. But let's go back to Mark's text which begins:

"As Jesus started on his way...". Now, in Mark's Gospel the word "way" is a term he uses for the journey that Jesus is on to Jerusalem as the suffering servant Messiah. And so, this phrase, coupled with the man running up to Jesus, indicates a sincere attempt by the man to get on the road too. Either that or it represents an interruption and distraction to Jesus' intended path. In Mark's Gospel disciples are characterised as being *on* the way with Jesus or *in* the way of his intended purposes. So, what of our rich, young man?

The man's posture, his reverent address to Jesus, and his question all appear to indicate the kind of humility and seeking that would characterise Jesus' ideal disciple: [he] fell on his knees before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

But let's not be fooled! This young man was both rich and fastidious in keeping the commandments. He had everything he wanted here and now, but what about later, after he died?

I'm sure he'd have been encouraged by Jesus' first response about the need to keep the commandments – after all, he'd been doing that all his life. But then Jesus sees something about this man. We don't know what, for Mark merely tells us that "Jesus looked at him and loved him". Whatever it was, it leads Jesus to peel back the apparent humility and piety of the young man and to expose his Achilles' heel: the one thing that threatens his embarkation on the journey to eternal life. "One thing you lack," Jesus says, "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

Not at all what the young man wanted to hear! Indeed, probably the last thing he wanted to hear! For it reveals his desire to “inherit eternal life” more as a desire to possess eternal life, but only so long as it doesn’t cost him any of his current assets. Jesus is drawing a very clear line in the sand: defining the problem as being not so much eternal life but temporal life: life in the here and now. Take care of where your heart, your life, is now. As is said elsewhere, it’s not so much money in itself that is the problem, rather it’s the love of money, the reluctance to let it go, to acknowledge that it owns him, *that* is the root of all evil.

To say that Jesus’ response took the wind out of the young man’s sails would be an understatement. Mark tells us: “At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.”

But I suspect all who heard Jesus’ words would have stood open-mouthed – especially when Jesus went on to say: “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.” The disciples certainly were perplexed. Remember they grew up in a society which saw wealth as a sign of God’s blessing! Is Jesus really turning that understanding on its head?

But Jesus doesn’t leave it there. He moves into what might be thought to be the realm of the absurd when he says. “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.” For once, though, the disciples got what Jesus was on about, for they responded with the question: “Who then can be saved?” No doubt Jesus’ words had left them feeling powerless, helpless, maybe even bordering on despair. But then they hear Jesus tell them, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

While Jesus had been saying these things, clearly Peter had been thinking and he’d linked Jesus’ words with the disciples’ own leaving of

nets, family, homes, and businesses and exclaims, “We have left everything to follow you!” Implied in this no doubt was the thought, “We did what the

young man couldn’t do. What do we get?”

At this point we might anticipate that Jesus would in some way chastise Peter, but rather he blesses him by illustrating what the rich young man missed out on in his inability to give up what he thought were riches. Let me remind you what Jesus said: “Truly I tell you, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

Perhaps this is one of the most remarkable statements by Jesus in the Gospels. In emphasising that the rich man’s question about how to inherit eternal life was misguided, he points to discipleship being about the temporal life that spills on into eternal life, both of which are dependent on the impetus and sustenance of God. The journey to which Jesus calls us in this world leads to the one we hope for in the world to come. Moreover, if we take the risk of the path of discipleship, Jesus’ promise is of a hundredfold blessing in the life to come. That’s not to say that the journey of discipleship will be easy – and it was, remember, too much for the rich young man to even contemplate. Indeed, going back to the start of our passage, we recall that the “way” we’re called to follow is that of the suffering servant Messiah: no easy way! But unless we set out on the journey and unless we persevere with the journey, we will stop short of the eternal life that the rich young man sought and of the fulfilment of the promise that Jesus makes. May

we all be camels that somehow, with God's grace, make it through the eye of a needle!