

Pentecost 19
11/10/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Hebrews 4:12-16
Psalm 17
Mark 10:17-30

Sermon preached by Rev. Peter Blackwood

It is easier for a Mercedes to drive through a revolving door than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. That's my favourite translation of the verse about the camel going through the eye of a needle. A lot of time has been wasted trying to explain how a camel can get through the eye of a needle. Such explanations usually involve redefining either how big some needles can be or how small some camels can be. It all amounts to nonsense. A camel can't get through the eye of a needle any more than a Mercedes can get through a revolving door.

Why then has it been necessary to persuade ourselves that camels can get through needles? Because we know we are rich and that according to Jesus' argument unless a camel can somehow get through the eye of needle then the position for us vis a vis the Kingdom of God looks pretty grim.

In 1980 the World Council of Churches held a conference on mission and evangelism in Melbourne. Many churches were involved in study material that was connected with the themes of that conference. The most startling question that sticks out in my mind from those studies was, "Is there good news for the rich?" Because we who are rich want the answer to that question to be yes we want to be able to get that dromedary through that impossible aperture. If only a camel could get through a needle.

For Christians wealth is one of the great imponderables. If you don't have it you have problems and if you do have it you have problems. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage to 258 could see the problems of having wealth. He wrote of the affluent of his day: "Their property held them in chains ... chains which shackled their courage and choked their faith and hampered their judgement and throttled their souls ... They think of themselves as owners, whereas it is they rather who are owned; enslaved as they are to their own property, they are not the masters of their money but its slaves."

Another great Christian leader wrote about wealth. In one of his renowned 40 sermons John Wesley spoke of money: "Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can ... Money never stays with me. It would burn me if it did. I throw it out of my hands as soon as possible, lest it find its way into my heart."

There is a strange ambivalence in what Wesley is saying, an ambivalence that has always been present in the church. On the one hand material possessions are God's gifts, the product of the talents that he has given to people, using the natural resources that he has created. These possessions given into the hands of men and women are to be used to the glory of God.

On the other hand the pursuit of riches is always in danger of becoming an end in itself, blinding us to the need of God and making us careless of the claims of others so that the love of money becomes a root of all evil.¹

Now let's check ourselves here. Let's make sure that these little excursions into what other people have said about wealth are not really ways of shrinking camels and enlarging needle's eyes. Are we getting away from the hard issue that Jesus placed before the rich young ruler who had done all he thought he could in order to enter the kingdom. He had kept the law, not just recently but since his bar mitzvah. This was a good man. He is so good that having done everything he asks if there is anything else he can do. Mark 10:21 *Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."* The disciples were astounded at Jesus pronouncement about the rich because they may not have been as rich as the young ruler but they were not impoverished. They were not beggars. They had seen a good young man who slips up on only one point. 99% looks like a pretty good result. If that man can't earn his way into heaven then who can get in. Is there good news for the rich? What is going on here?

What has Jesus asked the young man to do? He has kept the commandments. He can tick them all off. At the end of each day he can place his hand on his heart and say I have not killed anyone today, I have honoured my father and mother, I have not coveted my neighbour's ox. I can tick every box. A bit like ourselves as we come to the prayer of confession and realise with some relief that we don't feel any great burden of guilt. In fact I don't think I rated so much as a blip on the list for this week. What a comfort. What a nice chap I am.

But what happens if we start thinking like Jesus was suggesting. Not thinking of me and the check list of virtues, but thinking about me and the rest of humanity. What about me in my wealth thinking about wealth and the poor. What about me and my peace thinking about peace and those who know no peace. Jesus invited the young ruler to follow Jesus – to think differently about the instruction of God. If I am caught up in the sin of the world – if confession is not just a private matter but a corporate thing – if I confess that I participate in the sin of all humanity then ticking off some check list of virtue is nonsense. Of course, now, the eternal life thing must be even further away, much more impossible. This means we have all got to be good for any of us to arrive. That is why following Jesus makes sense – following the one who has arrived – let the God of grace take away the effect of evil in our lives, so that set free from guilt we can get on with living the love and grace of Christ as we are enabled.

Mark 10:27 Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." This is the same answer for everyone. It is good news for the rich, it is good news for the poor, it is good news for those who rely on their skills for survival, their talents with their hands, their eloquence, their wisdom. None of these can earn their way into heaven. It is impossible for mortals. The good news is that it is not impossible for God.

¹ John Macquarie, *A Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (SCM) p. 356

That is the good news for all God's people. Entry into the kingdom is impossible for human beings. It happens to be more impossible as we place reliance on our wealth or on our cleverness or our strength, our manual skills, our wit, our connections in high places. It is relinquishing these things that gives us power so that others may be empowered, (sell or you have and give to the poor). Then we begin to catch onto what entry to the kingdom is about. And even then, at the end of the day it is only because our entry to the kingdom is made possible through Jesus Christ that we can stand secure. It is quite impossible otherwise. And nothing would make any difference to that truth even if you could get a camel through the eye of a needle, or a Mercedes through a revolving door.
