

Sunday 28
11/10/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Psalm 22

Mark 10:17-31

Everything, for everything

Like the reading we heard last week in which Jesus was teaching about divorce, our reading this morning is another one of those texts in Mark's gospel which really makes us sit up and listen!

We take notice of this text for the same reason as we noticed the one on divorce: because we sense that it might be speaking to *us*, or about someone close to us, and that it might be speaking *negatively* about us or them. And yet Jesus' teaching about wealth in this morning's reading is less clear than what he seemed to be saying about divorce. Whereas we know whether we are divorced or not, or whether we *want* to be divorced, wealth is a *relative* thing: Am I rich in the way the man Jesus met was, and so is what was said to him also said to me?

Now, there are a couple ways of overcoming or dismissing the challenge that this text seems to make to us.

The first way is to deny that God would ask us to give up the things we have, because the fact that we have them is itself the proof that we are with God and God is with us. This way of thinking has its supporters today, and was also strong in Jesus' time. When Jesus remarks how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, the disciples are astounded and ask, "Who then can be saved?" That question implies that the rich *are* rich because they are with God. If the rich-and-so-righteous can't get into heaven how can anyone else? For the fact that others are less rich indicates that they are less righteous before God.

But Jesus clearly does not measure our closeness to God by the amount of possessions we have.

The second way of sidestepping Jesus' challenge is to assure ourselves that it doesn't apply to us because we are not, like the man in the story, "*very*" rich. ("Very rich" is from Luke's version of the story; Mark and Matthew have "had many possessions"). Not being "*very*" rich, we don't have the enormous abundance which many very rich people do have. But the fact that we hear that the man who approached Jesus was very rich distracts us from the central issue, for the *disciples* did not have many possessions and yet they too had given all up to follow Jesus. It is not the *amount* the man was instructed to give away which is central but the fact that it was *everything*. (If there is anything to be said about the fact that the man was very rich it is that the more we have, the less likely we will be able to let it go, perhaps especially if we have accumulated that wealth by our own efforts).

So we *can't* simply deny the application to ourselves of what Jesus said to the rich man by citing a different principle - that God wants us to be wealthy and prosperous; and neither can we declare ourselves relatively "un-rich" and so let Jesus' word be one for somebody else.

What, then, are we to do with what Jesus says here? The first possibility is to take his word to that man as a word to *everybody*, and to give away all we have. The second possibility is to conclude that the teaching doesn't apply to us, just as we might have concluded last week that Jesus' text on divorce and adultery does not apply to us (if we are not divorced, or wanting to be; or just that it is too uncompromising).

But neither approach is satisfactory

The particular call which God makes on the lives of each particular person can't be turned into some type of legal principle. Just because Jesus called one person to give it all away, we can't conclude that he expects the same of all. But, on the other hand, that doesn't mean that *some* of us will not be subject to just such a call.

How can we *know* whether it is us or not, and so just what we are to do?

The fact is that we *can't* know what we are to do about our money and possessions with any great degree of certainty. It is not just that the will of God for our particular lives is hard to discern, which of course it often is.

It is *also* that, important as knowing and action are, knowledge of the law and doing it are not the first things in the Christian life. Note the question the rich young man presents to Jesus: "what must I *do* to inherit eternal life"

We might be tempted to respond to what Jesus says by attempting ourselves both to obey all the commandments and also giving away all about possessions and following Jesus, as if by "doing" these things we were meeting all Jesus' requirements and so were then able to tick off all the necessary boxes we need filled before we can get into heaven.

But to *do* something (or *not* do something) *in order to* win eternal life is not going to get us very far; our call is not to impress God with our works.

That leaves us in what Jesus names an "impossible" position: how can we know how to act? How can we do what needs to be done if doing is not the point? We can't know exactly, and so we begin to get a sense of what Jesus means when he says, "how *hard* it is to enter the kingdom of God".

But he follows that up directly with the remark that while for human beings it is impossible, it is not for God. It's not that God will somehow get us into heaven via some obscure loophole, a legal equivalent of Jesus' grotesque image of forcing a camel through the eye of a needle! We find our way into God's kingdom not by doing the law, nor by God ignoring the law, but by God's *grace*.

Better than the "What must I do?" question is, "What must we *be* in order to inherit eternal life?" The answer of the New Testament is that we are to be a people whose position in the kingdom concerns what *God* has done, and not what we ourselves have done...

For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. There is, then, some good news here for the rich - whether the *really, really* rich or the "little bit" rich which a good many of *us* are.

Giving away your money will not impress God. We don't *buy* our way into heaven by buying meals for hungry people, for our relationship to God is not a matter of how much or how little we have done. But, at the same time, those whose lives *have* already been touched by God *do* have work to do, including buying meals for hungry people, clothing them, housing them, and perhaps also discovering for ourselves what it means to be hungry and without adequate clothing or housing or whatever...

The good works Christians are called to do are to be a *response* to having heard the good news about God's kingdom, and not the *means* of getting into the kingdom.

In relation to all this, two specific points of application...

The first has to do with our own personal resources. We don't much focus on the question of personal stewardship in congregations like ours because they tend to have the luxury of enough resources to manage reasonably without constant attention to levels of personal giving.

And yet the call to give, and to give generously, does not go away on this account. Responsible giving is not about what we perceive is needed to keep afloat a particular institutional form; this is giving as a minimum. Responsible giving is just that – a *response*: it reflects our having heard the invitation to share in God's impossible work – the opening up of the kingdom of heaven.

What our personal share in this looks like is for each of us to determine, but it should be *actively* determined. If the impossible call to give everything away *is* impossible, it doesn't mean that what we do actually give is a matter of unreflective indifference. As in relation to every other thing, changes in income and costs and need should be reflected in changes in giving – whether up or down. And the difficulty of what Jesus says here ought not to insulate us from the call to give generously, even sacrificially, for in this gift we say that there is more to fullness of life than what we have. Take an opportunity in the next week or two to consider how this relates to your own giving, whether through the offering plate or through other charitable support you offer.

The second point of application of what Jesus implies here about our resources is Hotham Mission, which is the subject of a session together today after morning tea. We put a lot of resources into the Mission. As a response to the gospel, it is a kind of community version of the personal responses we are each called to make.

It is the case that we run a significant deficit and are in the midst of a large-scale review of our resources – our “Mark the Evangelist Futures Project”. But the deficit itself is not a problem – at least theologically; there is nothing very sustainable about Jesus' proposal to the rich man! The more important question is why we do what we do – as a congregation resourcing the Mission. Our discussion about the Mission after worship this morning is not to ask the question about its funding but to consider how this is a response to the call to follow, such as we heard in Jesus' address to the rich man today and, in those terms, what kind of “return” we image the congregation receives.

These are just two ways in which what Jesus says to the rich man might make a claim on us as individuals and as a community.

In making personal and community responses to the declaration that *God* is to be our “all”, we recognise that we cannot lay a claim on God, without God also laying a claim on us. And each of those claims is absolute. Just as we throw out the plea that God do what we *cannot* do – accept us and draw us to himself – so also God throws back the challenge that it be *all* of our self which moves to him.

It is the response to the love of Jesus which the sad man in our story could not make, for it turned out for him – as for us – that there was more at stake than just getting it right with the commandments. The work of our lives is to point to more than to our achievements, moral or otherwise. God gives us all of himself, and asks that we give all of ourselves in return, even if, for the time being, it looks like we are hanging on to something. God knows what we need in order to live; we are in the process of learning what others need, and of sharing with them from what we have. This is the following of Jesus.

By God's grace, may we ever be growing more fully into such discipleship, to God's own glory and to the benefit of those around us. Amen.
