

Pentecost 20
14/10/2012

Mark the Evangelist

Job 23:1 - 9, 16 - 17

Psalm 22:1-15

Hebrews 4:12 - 16

Mark 10:17 - 31

What must I do to inherit eternal life?

When we read the scriptures in church, ancient words from another time ring out. These texts do not provide us with a handbook of morality or doctrine. Nor are they a literal historical record of something we wish to repeat for its own sake. These texts are part of our collective memory. They are words shaped for repeated use in the community of faith, in worship, and in teaching and prayer. These stories, problematic as they may seem to us at times, are words of faith that articulate imaginative models of reality in which the hearers are invited to engage. We return to them again and again because, though they are ancient, they refuse to stay back there. They remind us whose we are. They press on us and ask new questions about our life and the way we choose to live.

Mark's story about the rich man took place on "the way" to Jerusalem. It is followed immediately by Jesus' third prediction of his passion and death. Everything in this story is overshadowed by the lurking image of the cross: the symbol of Jesus' self-giving that ever since has been the Christian symbol of the way to life.

There are three episodes in this reading, all of which deal with different aspects of the theme of riches and poverty. The first is about a good hearted man who, though claiming to seek a deeper level of spiritual satisfaction, nevertheless refused Jesus' invitation to become a follower, and went away sorrowful because the cost was too great. His "many possessions" meant he was addicted to his affluence. He could not un-encumber himself, redistribute his wealth to the poor, and follow Jesus. The second episode reports Jesus' private instructions to the disciples on how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. The third episode contains Jesus' promise to the disciples that they will be amply rewarded for putting aside their earthly goods and following him.

It was an understanding of Jesus' day that wealth was a sign of God's blessing. Therefore the rich man was already blessed. He had the means to give alms and the freedom to fulfil his religious duties. But he went away sorrowful. On the face of it treasure in heaven was denied to him who already shared the blessing of God. It seems shocking, as though God gives with one hand, and takes away with the other.

The rich man came asking what he had to do to be sure of inheriting eternal life. The word inherit has its root in the idea of a parcel of land – a place, a share. He, who seems to have had many properties, was treating the question of eternal life as though it were another acquisition, like signing another deed of sale.

The conversation that follows does not seem to be about God. The first four commandments are not mentioned. The commandments that are up for debate are all concerned with our ethical life: our relationship with one another. In particular the language for the last commandment: *you shall not covet* changes to *do not defraud*. *To covet* means to *yearn to possess something that belongs to another*. The change of wording to *defraud* makes the text resound even more deeply for us. Did the man have many possessions because he could not quench a deep and obsessive yearning to make other people's wealth his own? Was he treating his quest for eternal life as just another acquisition that in his obsession, he must own?

Jesus did not debate with the man. He put his finger on the issue: *Sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me*. A sorrowful man departs. He was possessed by his possessions. He is attached to everything he has, and it distracts him from the call of God. Despite his faithful keeping of the law, Jesus' question exposed where the desires of his heart really lay. He did not really love God, or his neighbour as himself. Jesus' looked on him with love and wished him to find the life he sought. But the man could not go there. This is the only time in Mark when a person Jesus calls to follow him turns away. The rich man is not the only one to grieve about that.

The graphic is a pun on the second episode: Jesus' teaching: *It is easier for a camel go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven*. From the ninth century it was popular to say Jerusalem had a low, narrow gate called "the eye of a needle" and that a camel could go through it, but only on its knees. The intention of this pious story was to instruct people in the humility required to enter the Kingdom of God. Another response has been to say the Greek word for camel is very similar to the Greek word for rope and that perhaps a scribe had made an error here. Neither suggestion is necessary. The story means what it says: the biggest animal you know cannot fit through the smallest hole you can think of. The Americans have a saying: *It would be easier for Nelson Rockefeller to fit through the night deposit slot of the First National Bank than for a rich person to inherit eternal life*. In Australia we would say: *It is easier for Clive Palmer to fit through the night deposit slot of Wespac Bank than it is for rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven*. Entry into eternal life is not our work. It comes as a response to God's gift of grace. To have eternal life is, as Paul says: *to have nothing, yet possess everything* [2 Cor 6:10].

In the third episode Mark speaks of the reward that comes to those who do give everything for the Kingdom. The rewards, and the sufferings, will be experienced in the present, and they will extend to the life to come, through being joined to the Christian community. The reference to *hundredfold* is a sign of great fruitfulness, not based on natural kinship or material wealth, but on the gifts of God's grace.

From early times some Christians chose to live the way of poverty, not as a way of earning the kingdom, but in obedience to a call they heard in passages like this, and as a prophetic sign that it is possible to have the treasure that is beyond all price. Many courageous and generous deeds were inspired by this radical response to Jesus' call, but there was no virtue in poverty as such, even though there are special spiritual dangers for those who have wealth.

While this story asked a particular man about his wealth, whether we are rich or poor it asks us to reflect on whether some obsession we have is interfering with our openness to the call of God. The question must always be: on what have we set our heart? This is the issue that is worked out in Job where the forces of evil are allowed to test the hypothesis that a righteous man will lose his faith if he loses his wealth and well-being. The issue that is touched upon in Hebrews is that Jesus Christ, who was equal with God chose to become poor for our sake, that we might become rich. Through him we are offered the chance to find life in communion with God. And that is to become rich in the deepest sense of the word.

The challenge that comes to us in the Gospel is like this:

One day an elderly monk was walking along a road when he came upon a most beautiful and precious stone. He gathered it up and put it into his bag. A bit further along the road he met a beggar who asked him for some food. When the monk opened his bag and shared some bread with the beggar, the beggar noticed the beautiful, precious stone and asked to see it. He was so entranced he asked if he could keep it. The monk gave it to him.

Some years later the beggar sought out the monk. He said he wanted to ask him for something else. The monk said - what can I give you? The beggar said. I want whatever you have that enabled you to give me that precious stone.

Mark tells us Jesus Christ came to meet us with the offer of the richest treasure there is, which is not based on wealth or power. The downside of this offer is that it challenges everything we hold to be important in life, and that can be truly shocking. But this offer comes from one who looks on us in love, and wills that we should be freed from everything that holds us in servitude. Freed to enjoy the inheritance God has given us in the world, and freed to build for the future in the light of God's gift. There isn't a better offer anywhere, than that.
