

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 11 OCTOBER 2009

Rev. Graham McAnalley

Mark 10: 17-30

"Jesus on Wealth"

"Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor ... then come, follow me."

This is one of the hard sayings of Jesus. It was hard for the rich man whom we are told Jesus loved. When he heard these words *"he was shocked and went away grieving, for he (like us) had many possessions."* And Jesus let him go; Jesus didn't water down his demands to gain another follower. This is the only account in Mark's Gospel of a person being called by Jesus and responding, not by following, but by turning away. As one commentator has said, "it attests the special power of possessions to hinder Christian discipleship." And that's what Jesus is recorded as saying: *"How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"*

We may not consider ourselves to be wealthy – after all we're not in the same league as some of our neighbours we could mention, or of company CEOs we could name – but compared with very many people in this country, and with many millions in other parts of the world, we are wealthy, very wealthy, each one of us.

"Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor ... then come, follow me." **A hard saying indeed!**

It's a difficult passage we have before us this morning. How are we to understand it? More to the point, what is it saying to us today, to you and me, about Christian discipleship?

There have always been some who have heard these words of Jesus addressed personally and literally to them. Hermits went off to live in poverty and isolation. Others lived in religious communities, as some do today, taking a vow of poverty. Perhaps the best known example is Francis of Assisi, the son of a wealthy merchant, who renounced his wealth and spent the rest of his life ministering to the poor after hearing Jesus' words, bidding his disciples to leave all, as a personal call addressed to him.

On the other hand, we know that there were followers of Jesus who were not required to leave everything to follow him. The inner circle of the twelve disciples certainly abandoned their means of livelihood to follow Jesus around Galilee and into Samaria and Judea, although they were hardly wealthy and would have had few if any possessions to sell. We know, however, that there were other followers of Jesus, including women of substance, who supported Jesus and his disciples in their ministry. Not everyone who followed Jesus, it seems, was required to divest themselves of all their possessions. We breathe a sigh of relief.

One way of reading the story of the rich man is to hear the challenge of Jesus addressing, not his wealth as wealth, but his wealth as that which is more important to him than following Jesus. His wealth stands between him and discipleship. And so the challenge to us in this Gospel reading is not to let anything we cherish – family, friends, reputation, occupation, wealth – stand in the way of us taking with utter seriousness the call to follow Jesus.

I think that's a legitimate challenge to take from this passage of Scripture, but I don't think it's the primary challenge. Jesus' words to the disciples, *"How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"*, focus our attention on the man's wealth and on the kingdom of God. And so we really need to look more carefully at this story with which we are probably too familiar. We've heard it so many times, and often without an appreciation of its context in the ministry of Jesus and the social conditions of the day, that its challenge has been well and truly blunted.

Let's begin by trying to look at this man's wealth. When he approached Jesus, Jesus quoted the commandments to him, and he responded that he had kept them from his youth. Jesus seemed to accept that without question. The man was an observant Jew – at least in most things. The commandments Jesus quoted were the last six of the Ten Commandments – those that deal with one's relationships to others – or were they? Jesus left one out: *"You shall not covet your neighbour's house, wife, slave, ox, donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbour,"* and in its place he substituted a law from elsewhere in the Torah: *"You shall not defraud."* Did Jesus' memory fail him at that point, or was this substitution intentional? There are some scholars who argue, I think fairly convincingly, that Jesus knew what he was doing: he intended this substitution.

What Jesus was quoting, in an abbreviated form, is Leviticus 19:13, which reads: *"You shall not defraud your neighbour; you shall not steal; you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a labourer."* This quote suggests that Jesus is interested in how this man gained his wealth; perhaps he's not quite as righteous as his earlier reply suggested. In the time of Jesus there were not many wealthy people in Palestine – and those that were wealthy had that wealth in property. Acquiring more property was the way to increase one's wealth; and the most common way of doing that was by foreclosure – taking a small peasant's landholding when he defaulted on a debt. It was the way in which the rich became richer and the poor became poorer. If this is how the young man became so wealthy, then selling all he owns and giving the proceeds to the poor would be an act of economic restitution. But that he couldn't contemplate, *"for he had many possessions."*

The kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed, and which he said was so hard for wealthy people to enter, is a realm of justice. Economic inequality cannot be part of it; there must be an equitable sharing of resources – none too wealthy and none too poor. That's not the kind of world in which Jesus lived and it is not the kind of world in which we live. But it is the world as it should be in the purposes of God; it is the world which Jesus envisioned and invited people to make their own.

We live in a world which is very far removed from that vision of Jesus. The story of the rich man, and Jesus' words about wealth and the kingdom of God, challenge us to think again and to think differently about affluence and wealth. There is inbuilt injustice in it. It is simply unjust that some people have the standard of living that most people, and all of us, have in this land, while millions in our world live a hand-to-mouth existence. Lack of good nutritious food or food of any kind, clean water, adequate sanitation, shelter, health care, education: this is the lot of the majority of this world's people.

The systems that create and sustain untold wealth and poverty in our world need to change, and we need to recognise the need for that change and to play our part in supporting that change wherever possible. And as individuals, we can also do much to help lift people out of poverty and enable them to live with dignity and hope. In large measure, it's a matter of how we use our wealth.

We can, of course, and hopefully do, give generously to organisations that are fighting poverty and bringing education, health care and other necessities of life to the world's poor and disadvantaged. At this particular time we need to share with those who are suffering from the natural disasters that

have ravaged countries in our region in the last two weeks. But we can also make a difference by the way we spend the money we do not give away. Sometimes we don't think sufficiently of what is responsible shopping in the supermarket and department store. Do we buy coffee and tea whose price is an exploitation of growers, or are we willing to pay a little more to give growers a just return? Do we buy chocolate that is produced by child slave labour, or pay a little more for chocolate that is produced free of child slavery? Do we buy goods from a multinational company that contributes to childhood deaths in developing countries by encouraging mothers to use infant formula rather than breast milk where there are no facilities for sterilization, thereby adding to infant mortality? Do we buy clothing that is produced in sweat shops here and abroad, or are we willing to pay a little more to ensure that workers are paid fairly for their labour? I could go on. "Fair Trade" and "Fair Wear" should mean something to us as we do our shopping. By our actions, consciously or unconsciously, we often act justly or unjustly. We need to take our Christianity into the marketplace.

The challenge of this morning's Gospel to us is not to sell everything we have and live on the charity of others; it is to use responsibly the resources we have and to play our part in answering the prayer we so often pray: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth...."