

Sermon for Sunday 13 October 2024

Trinity 20 year

**Job 23: 1 – 9, 16 – end; Hebrews 4: 12 – end;
Mark 10: 17 – 31**

Weighed down by Possessions

In 1859 a clipper called the Royal Charter set sail from Melbourne, Australia, destined for Liverpool, carrying an estimated £172m worth of gold – some of it as gold bullion - and around 370 passengers. Some of these passengers were gold prospectors, bringing home their findings from the gold rush which had taken so many people abroad to seek their fortunes. After the cut-throat climate of the mines, they kept their riches close, with gold nuggets sewn into their belts. On the night of 25 October, with the ship only three hours from Liverpool, a hurricane blew up. The wind was so strong that the anchor chains were broken and the ship was driven towards rocks off Anglesey, where, pounded by waves, she broke up and quickly sank. Around 450 passengers and crew died in the shipwreck, although a small

number managed to swim ashore. Gold is heavy. Many of those who died would have been pulled down into the water by the weight of the gold they carried in their clothing.

Today's Gospel reading, the story of the rich man who seeks Jesus out, is one of the most challenging in the Gospels. It invites us all to examine our relationship with our possessions and our money. We all have different amounts of money and different relationships to money. Some of us may be struggling to keep up with rising costs - of food and of heating in particular. But many of us are more comfortably off. Just as was the case in the time of Jesus.

The conversation we heard in our Gospel reading today between Jesus and the rich man is one of many such intimate encounters that are recorded in the Gospels with a wide range of men and women. But it's the only occasion recorded of Jesus inviting someone to follow him – and of them refusing. And the reason this man refuses is that he can't let go of his possessions. He's not a bad man – far from it. He's been keeping all the

commandments Jesus lists since his youth. But he is wealthy.

For some reason as he talks Jesus misses out the commandment 'you shall not covet', which is all about being content with what we have and not desiring what others have. I talked about that briefly in our 9.00 a.m. service last week. As well as missing out that commandment, Jesus adds in 'you shall not defraud'. We don't know why. But just perhaps Jesus is putting his finger on something specific about this man's weakness where money is concerned.

Jesus is sometimes referred to as 'the word of God'. He is, certainly – God's last word – his final and most complete explanation of what God is like to us human beings. Here, in this story, is Jesus, the 'word of God... living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword' as our reading from Hebrews put it, 'able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart'.

This man has come running to Jesus, detaining him as he is about to set out on a journey, kneeling before him, because he knows he wants

something that he doesn't yet have. It's a strong and deep desire – something he can't ignore. With all his wealth, and his keeping of the commandments, something is still missing from his life. He's not satisfied deep down. So he asks Jesus, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?'

We may be used to thinking of this question as meaning 'How do I get to heaven when I die?' But theologian Tom Wright suggests a different way of interpreting this. Eternal life isn't just about what happens when we die. It's tied up with the idea of 'thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven' – the possibility of a new era here – of a world saved and transformed by God, ushering in the freedom, justice and peace promised by God. This man wants to be part of that era, of that kingdom. Perhaps he senses that his material wealth is not enough and will never satisfy. Somewhere deep down he is longing for more.

Jesus loves him for that. This is the only place in Mark's Gospel where we're told that Jesus loves someone. Jesus loves him and knows what he

needs, and tells him '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.' Tom Wright suggests that this isn't so much about a treasure he can't have until he dies, but the treasure that he can enjoy in God's kingdom here on earth. By living a very different kind of life. One that is not centred on money and possessions.

But, the man goes away sorrowful. It seems he just can't let go of his possessions and take up Jesus' offer. What an extraordinary experience he has missed. To be invited into the circle of Jesus' followers. To have known him intimately. But he walks away.

So, what about us? What is it that holds us back from simply following Jesus? What is it that gets in the way? Do we fall into the same category as this man who had so many possessions? I know I have far too many. Or is it something else which prevents us from following him in the way we might? Jesus' suggestion 'go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor', might leave us

too feeling shocked. But do we love our possessions and our money so much that we would turn down an invitation to follow Jesus? Are we like those gold miners who were literally so weighed down by their wealth that they couldn't be saved? Or is there something else that tends to pull us away from putting Jesus first in our lives?

We don't all necessarily have to sell everything we have and give away the money to the poor. There are plenty of examples in the Bible of Christians who lived settled lives with homes and businesses. But we do need to be ready to be generous when Jesus calls us to. With our time, our money, our talents, or whatever he asks of us. During the autumn, starting on 27th October, we are going to be running a giving campaign in St Michael's. Because unless we increase our income we are not going to be able to afford a full-time Vicar in the future. You will be hearing more about this.

Meanwhile, let us ponder on this story. Let us have the courage to ask Jesus what it is that holds

us back in our faith. And remember, that with
God, all things are possible.

Amen

Revd Diana Young