

Sunday 14 October 2018
21st Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)
Job 23:1-9,16-17
Psalm 22:1-15
Hebrews 4:12-16
Mark 10:17-31

I'd Like to thank Fr Sam for his kind invitation to preach this morning. As is usually the case I checked the lectionary carefully to see if there was a sermon to be made out of the readings.

Now you would imagine that today's Gospel reading would be money for jam to a CEO of AnglicareSA in extracting donations from a congregation here at Walkerville.

And of course a superficial reading of today's Gospel raises issues for all of us because compared to the rest of much of the world we are enormously advantaged by; education, income, housing, health and environment.

Simply by growing up in Adelaide we have such a head start in the race of life. Are we being asked to divest ourselves of our advantages, to purify ourselves by poverty so we deserve eternal life? Do we need to endure like Job or do we need to sell all that we own and give the money to the poor?

I want to suggest there is something much deeper which is going on in the exchange between Jesus and the “rich young ruler” as we refer to the person seeking eternal life in today’s Gospel.

Some preachers in the past have sought to lessen the impact of Jesus metaphor of it being easier for a camel being to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.

They have argued that the eye of the needle was a small gate through which a camel could squeeze with great difficulty, hard but not impossible.

I think I was taught this version in my childhood and while it is somewhat reassuring it is just plain wrong.

“Who then can be saved?” say the astounded disciples, to which Jesus replies *“For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”*

If Jesus was really referring to a small gate through which camels could be squeezed, then this would be something we could accomplish ourselves and would not need divine intervention to make it possible.

The rich young ruler had it wrong, “*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” he asked.

It’s a common misconception we fall into, that somehow salvation is a kind of cosmic transaction in which in exchange for good behaviour we will receive the gift of eternal life.

And that’s the theological point which is at once both simple and amazingly mysterious, that through his death on the cross Jesus has reconciled us to God, through the grace of God not through our works.

What we are then embarked upon is a life of discipleship, not an altogether easy path in my experience, but one in which the transcendent power of the same God who can put camels through the eyes of needles, enables us, rebukes us, and changes us, through the power of his love.

The Gospel reading tells us that Jesus loved the rich young ruler but it is also clear Jesus discerned what was holding him back from the Kingdom.

In our reading from Hebrews this morning we heard:

“The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword. Piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow: it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

The thoughts and intentions of our heart; our secret selves, the impulses and inclinations that guide our behaviour, our real motivations and reason for being.

Jesus looked upon the young man with both love and understanding, just as he loves and understands us.

It was the abundance of wealth which prevented that young man from truly understanding the call of the Gospel, to humble himself and seek forgiveness.

Our wealth and possessions can also be a barrier to us as well, we are taught by our world, by our very life experience which constantly teaches us of the importance of acquiring and retaining material possessions if we are to be able to be safe and secure and to enjoy a good life.

And I think this is the deeper message of the story, that our reliance on our own position and power, our pride in our possessions and our security in our superannuation give us a sense of self-reliance and achievement. We don't need you God, we're doing all right on our own thank you.

I don't know about you but my prayer life improves immensely when I am in despair, when things go wrong and when my ordered existence is disrupted.

I become very aware that I need the God of the universe to help me, that in fact I can't do it all by myself; that my house and my car and my job and my wife and my children, (and even my grandchild), are not sufficient.

And this I suspect is the human condition; that it is our very sense of wellbeing and the sense of safety from our accumulation of wealth which insulates us from God, and that is why Jesus asked the rich young ruler to give away all that he had and to surrender himself.

In the last part of today's Gospel there is another way in which our wealth can be problematic. Peter begins to protest that the disciples have left everything to follow Jesus.

And Jesus says:

Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last and the last will be first.”

And this I think is where some of the Prosperity Theology comes in, where the hundredfold return which Jesus promises for faithfulness is mistaken for material wealth.

“I came so that they might have life, and have it abundantly.” Says Jesus in John 10.10 and this has similarly been turned into a message about material wealth, physical health and wellbeing as gifts of the spirit for those who God favours.

It's a very seductive message as Prosperity Theology aligns so well with capitalism and the desire for respect of the super rich.

For a while Hillsong was guilty of preaching Prosperity Theology until Tim Costello called Brian Houston on it.

My old mother had many sayings and this one is particularly apposite:

"It raineth on the just and unjust fella, but mainly on the just because the unjust nicked the just's umbrella"

This was mum's way of saying God does not bestow riches on the righteous.

And despite many claims to its authorship, we know this saying comes from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5.44-45);

"Love your enemies and do good to those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes the sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."

So the rewards Jesus promises his disciples are not in the coin of the world but in heavenly currency as yet largely unseen by those of us who remain here on earth.

A final word about wealth.

For those of you who may think I have left the wealthy off the hook and I should shake the Anglicare tin, of course all contributions are welcome, our services particularly the unfunded ones are stretched with the demands all around us. Today's Sunday Mail detailed the large number of those among us who are hungry.

For those who of us who are blessed in this life we have a greater obligation to serve. In Jesus own words from Luke 12.48b;

“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.”

These are not prerequisites of salvation, they are gifts of the Spirit as God works his changes in us to enable us to become the servant leaders in our community.

Amen