

## Reflection for Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> October 2021, Trinity 18

### Gospel: Mark 10:17-31

Has anyone here ever met a truly famous person? I never really have. I almost talked to the Archbishop of Canterbury once, and my former next door neighbour's daughter used to share a student house in London with someone who worked as a hairstylist and who did Bob Geldof's daughter's hair once. But that's about it.

As you can see, I don't mix with many famous people. But just imagine that you meet someone incredibly famous, and that everybody you know is watching. And then suddenly you find out that you are only allowed to ask them one question, and one question only. One question, one answer, and that's it. What would your question be?

No pressure...!

Our reading from Mark's gospel reports one of those occasions when somebody finds meeting Jesus a very uncomfortable experience. He meets Jesus. He asks him his one question – a very good question – 'what good thing must I do to inherit eternal life?' And he receives a very disturbing answer.

At this point you might expect we're going to be talking mainly about money. After all, that's what Jesus tells the young man to do – give it all away. And the bible talks about wealth and poverty and our attitude to money more than it talks about almost anything else. But money in itself is not our primary focus this morning.

You see, I can't help wondering about that man. Why did he approach Jesus in the first place? He was not in any great need. He had obviously been very well brought up. He had always kept the commandments. In fact, he sounds great; the sort of young man that any Jewish mother would love her daughter to marry. Apparently, he's honest, trustworthy, kind, charitable, loving, and as if that wasn't enough, in what would might well have been taken as a sign of God's blessing, he had a lot of money. And that's what he's called in other gospel accounts, 'The Rich Young Man'. He ticks every box. And yet, he

approaches Jesus with this question, as if he knows there's still something lacking in his life.

The man came to Jesus expecting to be told what he had to do. I wonder if he was looking for another box to tick – some additional duty, some additional religious action. Some of us are like that: we like bullet points and tick boxes. We like making lists! Perhaps the man was expecting Jesus to tell him to read the scriptures more; or pray more; or even to give more of his money to the synagogue or to the temple. But he was not expecting Jesus to say the one thing he actually said:

'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.'

What an instruction! The gospel says that Jesus looked at the man and loved him. Surely his words are shocking. Wasn't Jesus being harsh here? After all he wasn't talking to a Pharisee or a scribe. He was talking to a very good man, who was living a very good life, and who actually wanted to know if there was anything else he should be doing to inherit eternal life. Wasn't Jesus setting the bar impossibly high? It's not surprising that the young man went away sad - It's not a brilliant bit of evangelism!

Unless... Does anyone remember sand pictures? They were very sophisticated and trendy in the mid 1980s. You had a picture frame with 2 sheets of glass in and the narrow space in between was filled with some sort of clear liquid, and half filled with sand of different colours and densities. The sand made shapes that always looked like a landscape, with hills and shadows. That was clever enough, but the best bit was when you turned the whole picture upside down: the sand would sink down through the liquid to the bottom of the picture, where it would reform into a totally different landscape. It was amazing! We were a simple people in the 1980s.

That's what Jesus was doing – he was turning the young man's picture of his life upside down. Jesus wasn't being unkind, he was just doing what he's been doing for 2000 years: entering somebody's life and turning their whole way of seeing the world – their sense of priorities, their sense of identity, their sense of what really matters, everything– upside down.

Like most of us, the man assumed his life was based on how much he was doing. But Jesus turned this picture upside down. Jesus gave the young man, not an additional religious, moral or ethical duty, but an invitation to join him on a journey. The young man wasn't given another task or duty that was under his control. Instead, he was told to get rid of the source of all his control, his money, and then step out to travel, he knew not where, alongside people he didn't know, following someone he'd only just met.

And this is the point. The young man wanted to know if he would inherit eternal life. But eternal life doesn't begin after we die. It begins as we travel with Jesus. As we accompany him. As we follow him.

For some of us, that does involve literal travel. But even if we live in the same house in the same street in the same village all our lives, we will travel if we are following Jesus. We will travel in our attitudes to other people, in our attitudes to power and possessions, in our attitudes towards our world, in our attitudes to the things that God says are important, like justice and mercy – in all these things, we will be on a journey, even if we never move house.

But if we want to follow Jesus, we'll have to keep up. We'll have to travel light. When I was a student, I went on several hiking holidays youth hostelling with my then girlfriend, now my wife, Rhoda. We would trek from hostel to hostel, carrying all our supplies for the fortnight in huge heavy rucksacks. It was cheap, and youth hostels had separate dormitories, so our families were happy. I have to be honest – I hated lugging my big rucksack around up very beautiful but very steep areas of outstanding natural beauty. The only time I missed my rucksack was when it got stolen from a youth hostel in Castleton, and then I was hurt because the thief had nicked my rucksack but had left all my clothes, which I took as a criticism of my dress sense more than anything.

As we listen to Jesus' call to follow him, we might ask ourselves this morning: what things are we carrying that are a burden, not a blessing? What can we take out of our rucksacks? The rich young man's rucksack was full of money, and Jesus knew it. The bible is very realistic when it comes to money. It has some great one-liners: 'The abundance of a rich man permits him no sleep' 'Whoever loves money never has money enough' (Ecclesiastes). The challenge the rich young man faced was to trust that following Jesus would in the long run be

better than holding on to all his money. No wonder he went away sad. I've always hoped he came back again. Maybe he did.

Jesus' invitation remains for us today. It's a challenge as well. If we are to travel light, we might find that we are carrying things we'll have to get rid of. It might be our pride, or our self-righteousness, our resentment or our shame. It might be our wealth. Whatever it is will only be known to ourselves and it will be different for each of us, but whatever burden we are carrying, we will have to let it go. In fact, we might have to ask Jesus to carry the burden for us, for we cannot carry it for ourselves. And on the Cross, Jesus does just that, turning burden into blessing, turning the world upside down.

'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' asked the man. Jesus turned the whole question back to front and upside down. Eternal life doesn't wait for you, Jesus says: it starts now. Come and walk with me, and you will enter into eternal life, life in all its fullness. Travel light. And come, follow me.