

The Last will be First 14.10.18 Julian Templeton
Mark 10:17-31 Psalm 90:12-17

“The last will be first, and the first will be last.”
Mk. 10:31

‘The last will be first, and the first will be last’ seems a puzzling thing for Jesus to say. It seems puzzling because it runs contrary to experience: where, often, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer; the powerful accumulate even more power, etc. What is Jesus getting at in this counter-intuitive saying?

His context for saying it is a discussion with a wealthy man, who runs up to Jesus and kneels before him and asks: ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ When you think about it, running and kneeling is not something we would normally expect the wealthy to do. Why? They don’t *need* to do it. Imagine, to use an extreme example, if the richest man in the world, Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon (whose personal wealth estimated to be in excess of 100 billion US dollars), ran up to you, knelt before you, and asked: ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ You would be very surprised! And what would probably be so surprising is that the rich are very used to other people imploring *them* for help. So this is an extraordinarily undignified and humbling action for a rich man to do, to run and kneel before Jesus and ask: ‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’

Does this suggest that the wealthy man is looking for more than what wealth can buy him in this life? Possibly. Or is he, having secured a comfortable life in this world, seeking from Jesus a way of *securing a comfortable life in the next world*? If so, he would be like the Viking Kings buried with their boat and

treasure; or like the Egyptian Pharaohs entombed with their wealth: each practice strongly suggests that they were trying to set themselves up for a comfortable life in the next world. The idea that ‘you can’t take it with you’ seems not to have occurred to them or their families.

In another sense, though, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ is a very strange question. This is because you don’t normally have to *do* something to inherit; an inheritance is a *gift*. Normally one inherits not because one has done anything to deserve it but merely by the fact that one is a close relative of one who has died with an estate to disburse

But as the rich man had introduced the subject of *doing* something, Jesus does, in fact, give him something to do. After pointing out that God alone is wholly good, Jesus says to him: ‘You know the commandments’, and then proceeds to list some of them: you shall not murder or commit adultery or steal or bear false witness or defraud, you shall honour your father and mother.’ The man replies that he has kept all of these commandments since his youth.

Then Jesus, looking at him, *loves* him and said: ‘You lack one thing; go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and then you will have treasure in heaven, then come and follow me’. A strange way to ‘love’ someone! Probably the rich man thinks it strange too, because his countenance changes and he goes away with a heavy heart, since he is a man of great wealth. It seems that for this particular man, keeping the commandments, keeping the rules, is not enough; Jesus demands of him a sacrifice.

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Then Jesus looks round at his disciples and says: 'How hard it will be for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!' In other words, Jesus says: do you realise how difficult it is for those who 'have it all' to enter into God's kingdom? As Jesus says elsewhere, the rich have 'received their reward'; having been so well rewarded in life, they often don't feel the need to seek God for anything. Yet the disciples are amazed that Jesus should say that it is hard for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God, because they, very likely, concurred with the commonly held belief that wealth was a sign of God's blessing.

But Jesus persists with his line of argument, saying: 'Children, do you realise how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.' The disciples are astonished at this, and say: 'Then who can be saved?' The disciples seem to think: 'Well, if that's the case: who has any chance at all?' Jesus replies, for humans it is impossible, but not for God: for God all things are possible.' In other words, Jesus suggests: 'There's no chance at all you can pull off getting into God's kingdom by yourself; but there's every chance in the world if you let God help you.' (Peterson, *The Message*)

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One way of trying to understand the exchange between the Jesus and the rich man is that Jesus challenges him to demonstrate that his wealth will be no obstacle to discipleship by requiring him to put his wealth at the service of the poor. In other words, Jesus challenges the man, whose wealth means that he is often 'first', to put himself 'last', and to put those who are often 'last', the poor, 'first'. However, the rich man is not ready to do this, so he goes away with a heavy heart. He is as yet weighed down by his wealth and possessions. The

unanswered question is whether at some later point he will unburden himself of his captivity to money. Will he put the last first, and the first last?

Jesus realises that money has a *spiritual* as well as material power. Elsewhere he names that spiritual power as 'Mammon' and basically says that we cannot serve both God and Mammon; we have to choose between them (Matt. 6:24). Money operates according to the law of accumulation; the more we have, the more we can buy. But, equally, money is a harsh taskmaster; if we have more than we need we have the responsibility of deciding what to do with it, and for some people this becomes a source of anxiety. But those who do not have enough money, the poor and indebted, also know money as a harsh taskmaster; theirs is often a life of worry about how to survive on little or no money, or how to avoid the demands of their creditors if they are in debt. These material conditions have direct *spiritual effects*: for as Jesus also says elsewhere 'Where you treasure is; there your heart will be also' (Luke 12:34). The heart is, in biblical thought, the very centre of one's motivation. Therefore what you most treasure, what you most focus on, becomes effectively an object of worship: it becomes your god (Luther).

For instance, we may be able to imagine, or we may know from personal experience, how the accumulation of wealth can become, if we're not careful, a kind of god. Charles Dickens effectively evokes the figure of the rich miser in the character of Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge, a moneylender, is a pitiless creditor who begrudges his clerk, Bob Cratchit, a day off to celebrate Christmas. But after being visited by the ghosts of his deceased business-partner, Marley, and then, successively, being shown the reality of his past, present and likely future by three other ghosts, Scrooge

repents of his miserly attitude and tight-fisted ways and becomes a model of generosity and kindness. His wealth that used to be the source of his suspicion and judgment of others becomes now the source of joy as he discovers the liberation of giving it away. It is very likely, I think, that Jesus's encounter with the wealthy man was at least part of Dickens's inspiration for the character of Scrooge.

What if the wealthy man, having gone away from Jesus with a heavy heart, had a change of heart, gave away his wealth, and was thereby liberated to become a follower of Jesus? What if the wealthy man put himself last and put the poor first? Then we would conclude that his *material change* had brought about a *spiritual transformation*. (This was Jesus's assessment of the change-of-heart of another wealthy man: Zacchaeus, see Luke 19:1-19). The man would be freed from concern about the accumulation and management of wealth to, in Jesus's words: 'Seek first the kingdom of God, and his justice,' and then all the other things necessary for living—food and clothes and essentials— God would also provide as well. (Matt. 6:24-34)

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Even if we are not in the position of having a lot of surplus wealth to worry about, I presume that none of us is completely free from what we do about the accumulation of *possessions*: in other words, what we do about the piling up of stuff in our houses. Hoarding, it is said, is often an indication of a psychological inability to 'let go'. And those of us who find that space in our rooms becomes gradually less and less as we pile up more and more stuff because we are unable to get rid of it, know this from personal experience.

What might Jesus say to us? Would he ask us if our stuff, if our possessions, are taking up so much psychological and physical space that they are hindering us from being fully-engaged Christians? I know that is a hard question to ask; but I ask it of myself as much as I ask it of you. Or let me put the same question positively: if you weren't worried about what to do with piles of unused stuff, just think of the mental and spiritual energy you could put towards the kingdom of God. Just think how much freer we could each be, how fleet of foot, how responsive to God's call, if we learned to travel light. Just think how much freer we would each feel if we could put the needs of others first because we have learned to put our possessions, and self, last.

Might the principle of 'the last will be first, and the first will be last' also be applicable to our responses to two major contemporary challenges: climate change and Brexit? For example, it is often the case that the poorest peoples live in the most marginally productive areas: areas that are likely to be disproportionately affected by the increased incidence of extreme weather that a rise in average global temperature will bring about. How do we begin to put the livelihood of these peoples—often considered last—first? The same principle might also be applied to the current Brexit negotiations: how do we arrive at a 'good deal' for those who currently feel their needs are put 'last'—the economically and politically disempowered—a deal that puts them 'first'.

Let us ask God to give us the vision and the courage to put the last first, and put the first last.