

## Sermon preached at Wymondham Abbey

October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Mark 10.17-31

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother." ' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and 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.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.' Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, '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 now 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.'

Christians have different ways of thinking and talking about money. Very different! But Jesus is clear and uncompromising. To be rich is a great burden. To follow him is really demanding.

Well we all recognise the truth of that, I'm sure, however well off or not we are.

What might that burden involve? How about these three things? –

- We should acquire our wealth, our money, by honest, fair and generous means.
- We should use our money to do good, to and for those less fortunate than us;
- and, making the move from those pretty universal ethical principles to something more specifically Christian, we should not to let our money distract us from a life of Christian virtue; or, putting it better, distract us from a life following Jesus.

The richer we are, the keener those responsibilities cut.

The Bible is full of stories and injunctions that make this clear. At times it can seem that simply to be rich at all might amount to a moral failing in itself, or a danger to our spiritual health. In Luke's gospel we hear Jesus saying:

*Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God...  
But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.  
'Woe to you who are full now,  
for you will be hungry.*

Luke 6.20. 24-5

Still, Jesus does imply a distinction between the ownership of great wealth and the use of it, or misuse. Without money, the Good Samaritan couldn't pick up and look after the mugged man. Or look at how he rebuffs those who criticise his friend Mary for anointing his feet with priceless perfume. Jesus had a nuanced understanding of how we use money.

But he also knows when even the *possession* of wealth brings such temptations, such distraction, such corroding effects that life itself is distorted. So even the good man in today's gospel story, one who knows what is right and wrong, in Jesus' words 'lacks one thing'. He has in abundance, but lacks.... treasure in heaven. Where, as Jesus says elsewhere, neither moth nor rust can do their damage.

Jesus uses a famous image, an expressively exaggerated image: *It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle...* It's almost as though he's saying it's *impossible* for someone rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. We do better to see him saying - in high rhetorical style - that the moral and spiritual dangers of being rich are very grave.

And there might be another, more subtle message in what Jesus was saying: that giving away your wealth takes away not just the lure and distraction of riches, but also the lure of being a benefactor! That's when what should be the simple exercise of generosity becomes the exercise of power. I used to fundraise when I worked in the arts, and when you've had to woo and look after rich private donors, you soon learn this distinction!

Sadly, the rich (the really rich) can behave quite badly. The Bible is emphatically clear on this, as in the book Proverbs:

*Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker,  
but those who are kind to the needy honour him.*

*Proverbs 14.31*

Oppression of the poor isn't just unkind; it's a blasphemy.

We can see plenty of this, whether in those documentaries about the antics of the super-rich, or just as we observe the world around us. I lived in London for a long time, and I certainly saw some depressingly bad behaviour by those you might call the Rude Rich.

But - every human being is made and loved by God, so we should pause for a minute to think about that bad behaviour.

For some it may simply be that having great wealth makes them think they are more important than everyone else.

But I think for many it's more complicated. For one thing, the richer you are, the less you know how much you can trust those who are being friendly to you. Now here comes a terrible name drop, sorry - but I once saw how this worked when I showed Dua Lipa around King's College Chapel. She had quite an entourage with her, but among them were two or three friends from her school days: people that were friends before she became a global superstar, so who were her friends already. She knew she could trust them.

And that 'not knowing who you can trust' when you're rich is part of a wider fearfulness, I'd say. For some, being rich can seem to protect you against some of the difficulties of life. But it's a narcotically vicious circle, because the fear that makes you relish how your riches can cocoon you (and then makes you behave a certain way) is then compounded by the fear of losing those riches and thus losing that illusory safety and power, so the behaviour gets even worse.

Jesus cuts across all that: and very strikingly, because he challenges someone who probably does *not* behave badly, who tries to do the right thing. Even he is held back by his riches.

By now you're probably thinking, well yes, but all this is about the very rich. Most of us here don't fall into that category: perhaps very much don't fall into that category. Does any of this apply to us?

Well, for a start most of us are doing ok compared to the millions who live in grinding poverty across the world. Most of us are doing more than ok. Perhaps what Jesus has to say about the perils of wealth applies to us after all. It's a sobering thought. It might be that all those ethical, psychological and spiritual dangers that we readily see in the really rich, really do threaten us too, if in a less intense way. We need to be alert to this.

As so often, St Paul puts his finger on it. The *love of money* is the problem. It can make people mean, or dishonest, or self-important, or neurotic, or controlling. The *love of money* usually distracts us from the love of God and the love of others. This was probably the distraction Jesus saw in the rich man in the gospel story. It's a stark moment in the story. Instead of daring to give up that distraction and follow Jesus, he walks sadly away.

But of course, a bit of money can enable us to express love (like the Good Samaritan). Money is an essential, and like all the other essentials in our lives we can use it well. When we do that, when we use money well, rather than let it use us, then it becomes part of our walking with Jesus rather than walking away from him. And that's a journey, a *journeying*, characterised not by sadness and distraction, but by gratitude and generosity. That will be a good journey to be on.