

Mark 10: 17-31



Last week at Harvest Festival we were celebrating abundance and all the gifts which are tokens of God's bountiful care of us his children and now this week's gospel reading appears to preach a very different story suggesting we should give away all our possessions, all that abundance in order to devote our lives unencumbered by material possessions entirely to following Christ.

And if you are anything like me you find this text makes for somewhat uncomfortable reading. Are we, like the man in the story, observing as best we can the letter rather than the spirit of God's commandments while at the same time are we very attached and even protective of our riches, our many possessions? Could we in all honesty go home and make immediate arrangements to sell or give away all our goods and chattels and empty our bank accounts and I'm sure you would find as I do, that to make such a life changing ask would be incredibly daunting and one we would really not want to do.

So, what are we meant to do? And I think there are two aspects of this story that we need to consider in order to arrive at some sort of answer. The first is this, that if you think about it Jesus was in so many respects a man of abundance. Think of that wedding in Cana when he turned a quite enormous volume of water, somewhere between one hundred and twenty and one hundred and eighty gallons or well over six hundred bottles into the very best premier cru wine. With such abundance the wedding celebrations must have gone on for weeks if not months. Think of his feeding the five thousand out on the hillside so that not only did they all have an absolute feast to eat but there were basketfuls left over which I'm sure would have meant a doggy bag for everyone assuming they had such things then. Think too of how Jesus

obviously enjoyed sharing a good meal with friends and was more than happy to be richly entertained by a man like Matthew classed by the Pharisees and Scribes as a sinner because of being a tax collector. Reading the gospels I am quite sure Jesus both enjoyed and appreciated what we would term the good things in life but, and this is what is important, they were not and never would be central to his life. I think Jesus was the sort of person who could enjoy a jam sandwich eaten in the open with a swarm of children around him just as much as a six course banquet in some beautifully furnished mansion with the elite of Jewish society and all that truly mattered to him was the warmth and enjoyment of shared companionship. So, reflecting on this I feel that we should not feel guilty if we do enjoy a good meal or the comfort of our homes but at the same time always be ready to share such blessings with others and of course give grateful thanks. Giving thanks is not just for Harvest Festivals!

The other aspect of the story that struck me was the conversation between that man and Jesus. Here was a man who was fortunate enough to possess considerable wealth, considerable material possessions but at the same time a man astute enough to know that as yet he did not possess as it were the guarantee, the key if you like, to eternal life and he would like some sort of solid assurance from Jesus that this was something he could obtain in the same manner he had obtained all his other worldly possessions. Jesus answers his question as to how to obtain eternal life by listing the last six non- religious commandments which the man then assures him, he has kept since he was a youth. And I think we can almost imagine the man thinking rather smugly as he did so: 'Well that wasn't too hard so what next? Now do I get the key or a guaranteed pass?' Only for the bombshell to drop and be told that: '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.'

Sell all he had? Give everything away to the poor? No way! He'd worked for these things. Surely, he was entitled to them. What was the point of giving to the poor when there were so many of them and many of them would simply squander the money anyway. And if he did sell his possessions no one would appreciate them as he did. And in any case how many of the poor had kept those commandments as well as he reckoned that he had done? No, it was a preposterous idea. For that man his possessions, his wealth signified his success in life; they were his proof that he was a man to be admired, to be envied even. And here we should note that it was obvious to Jesus that this man was wealthy whether it was because of the outrageously expensive Patil Phillippe watch or the hand tailored robes from Saville Row that he wore. As with so many people in the western world today their status in life is based, in their

minds at least, on material wealth and financial success. And again being honest with ourselves do we slightly hanker over some form of material possession simply because cleverly designed advertising in essence tells us 'we're worth it'?

So back to our dilemma do we need to give away all our possessions and bestow all our money on the poor and here we do I think need to recognise that as was the custom of the time Jesus often used hyperbole to make his point. I think what he was aiming to do was really prick that man's conscience and say that he could have a far more fruitful and spiritually fulfilling life if he replaced his love, his craving even, of possessions with a true and heartfelt love for God and here it is interesting that Jesus omitted to include the first four commandments in the list he gave the man. The first four commandments that are surely the key to following in Jesus's footsteps. The first four commandments which prioritise God; the first four commandments which Jesus himself summed up as 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all mind, and with all your strength.'

And I think if we can only prioritise that commandment together with the second Jesus gave us to 'love your neighbour as yourself' then we will find that our love for material possessions and ensuring a reasonably healthy bank account will seem of very secondary importance. And, in that discovery, we will find that serving God by serving others and walking in Christ's footsteps brings an abundance of unimaginable and imperishable riches into our lives as expressed so beautifully in this prayer poem by Pat Robson: 'You who work by Christ's side and share his great love, you who touch with his hands and feel with his heart, his blessing is yours, his joy till the end. Take it, hold it, you are his friend.' What more could we possibly want?

Prayer: Mighty God, we lift up our hearts to you in gratitude for your love for us. Take our lives, our work, our leisure, the ordinary things of life and the special things, the sadness and the joy we know and have known. Accept our praise and thanksgiving as we offer ourselves to you in humble service and heartfelt worship and adoration. Through Jesus Christ our Lord