

Sunday between 9<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> October [28]

Mark 10:17-31

Do you consider yourself to be rich? I don't mean philosophically rich, or rich in faith, but in terms of cold hard cash, do you consider yourself to be rich? Most of us would say we are better off than many, worse off than some. And this is how we measure wealth, as a comparison with others, but particularly those around us in our own community. It has been proven that our sense of happiness is directly related to the relative wealth we have compared with others, where whole countries, like the Scandinavian states, who distribute wealth through high taxation but also by providing high quality public services for all with the proceeds, score as among the happiest nations.

Perhaps today we could compare ourselves with the rest of the world in terms of our wealth. If you have food in your fridge, clothes on your back, a roof over your head and a place to sleep, for example, you are richer than 75% of the world's population. If you have money in a bank account, your wallet and some spare change you have made it into the world's top 8%. 2.8 billion people, that is around half of the world's population, live on less than \$2 per day and 20% are in receipt of just \$1 per day. Now you can, with some accuracy, consider your own financial status in comparison with the rest of the world.

The massive gap between rich and poor is even more marked today than it was in Jesus' time, so the words of the write of the letter to Hebrews, that the word of God is alive and active and cuts more deeply than a 2 edged sword, is really very true for us this morning. There is no getting away from Jesus' teaching, it is harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.

These are confronting and convicting words and in the past people have tried very hard to find palatable suggestions of what Jesus really meant. One suggestion is that there may have been a gate in the walls of the city of Jerusalem called the "Eye of a needle" which was small and through which a camel could only pass were it completely free of the goods it was used for carrying. This was the theory many people have been told, but it came up on the quiz QI and in doing some research the current scholarly thinking is that there is no evidence of any such gate in Jerusalem and Jesus meant exactly what he said, you might as well try to walk an actual camel through the eye of an actual needle, the one you use for sewing your clothes, as to expect the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The seriousness of this teaching was not lost on the disciples, who then can do it? they ask completely without any idea. These men who have left everything to follow Jesus rather than being built up by this teaching and feeling vindicated that their place in heaven is assured, are, like the rest of us, shaken by these words of Jesus and wonder how it is that anyone will be able to do it.

How could we? Should we sell everything we own and live in vagrancy and dependence? Is that truly a reasonable solution, who here would choose this for themselves or their family? There are the monastic orders where people live in community with no personal possessions and freed from the concerns and worries of

earning and handling money, but the world as we know it would come to an abrupt end if we all went into a monastery!

Jesus tells us that for us it is impossible, but with God, everything is possible. Here is our answer, here is where Jesus is taking us. God must come first. Our relationship with God, our attitude, our heart, must all be fixed on God. With God all things are possible, with God a bank balance is not important. But if money is our primary concern, if the pursuit of wealth and a selfish clinging to wealth is what fills our thoughts and motivates our actions, we will miss God's call to us. As Jesus said in one of his other many teachings on wealth, you cannot serve God and money like you cannot serve 2 masters.

Jesus speaks with such passion against money because it has the potential to disastrously corrupt lives. As we have seen, feeling poor compared to people around us can cause us a great deal of unhappiness, focussing on our wealth can draw us away from our relationship with God. Wealth and possessions can be used to wield power over others and it can happen so gradually we don't even know we are doing it.

We put money first when we are consumed by worry about it, when we spend so much time earning it that we have no time for any relationships, not just with God but also with family and friends, we put money first when we are constantly looking at the next thing we want or need to buy. This is not about working hard and providing for your family, it's about doing it without forgetting why.

We earn money so that we have food on the table, a roof over our heads and clothes on our back. We use money as a tool to live, it is a problem when the pursuit of money is no longer a means to an end, but the end itself. Jesus is, of course, right. The only certain way of not being corrupted by money is to live without it altogether. But, as that is not possible for most people in our world, then we must keep God close by as we are exposed to the influence of the world.

Keeping God close through prayer and worship will mean we will listen for God's call to us in many situations and be ready to respond to it, even if that interferes with our worldly distractions. Keeping God close will keep us focussed on people, as God's created children, walking alongside us in God's own image, and their needs rather than focussing on the things that people have created to try to fill the holes in their lives, but that never really satisfy. Keeping God close will guide us with compassion through every circumstance, every encounter, every news report, and inform our prayers and actions.

Keeping God close, means there will be nothing in the world that can separate us from God, not money, not power, not distractions. Leading us, day by day, into closer relationship with our Father. For it God who holds the keys to the kingdom, we can't buy them or earn them, they are a gift by grace to us. When we accept this gift, our outpouring of love becomes our gift to the rest of the world still struggling.

What is impossible for us, is infinitely possible with God.