Sermon for 28th in Ordinary Year B

Readings: Job 23:1-9; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

i

The episode of the Rich Young Ruler is one of the most depressing stories from the ministry of Jesus. This young man with good health, good morals and social status who lives an exemplary life apparently fails to get into the kingdom. No wonder his face fell (v22); but the disciples were worried too: “Who then can be saved?” (v26).

The young man possessed everything that Judaism could offer. He kept the 10 Commandments and had done so since he was a boy (v20). Yet he was still searching for something more; he sensed that he lacked eternal life. He had hoped to satisfy this need by his faithful adherence to the Law, but it was not.

When he asked for eternal life he was not wishing to die and go to heaven, but was talking about eternal life in the sense of the present life of the Spirit, life that is enhanced, lived on the cosmic stage, inspired by a living encounter with God not according to a book, a foretaste of the life of heaven here upon earth. That is what he meant by eternal life.

Jesus doesn’t tell him the 10 Commandments are now irrelevant. He sees them as foundational for a peaceful and Spirit-led life, but keeping the commandments as the young man claims to have done is not enough. What he needs to do more is to give away his great wealth and follow Jesus.

Last week (see Sermon for 27th in Ordinary Year B) we saw how Jesus took the tradition of *The Book of Job* rather than that of the *Book of Proverbs* in his interpretation of sin and evil. This week, Jesus shows how he again favours *Job* over *Proverbs* in the matter of worldly wealth.

*Proverbs* belongs to that tradition that believes those who keep true to the faith are rewarded in this life. Choose Lady Wisdom instead of Mistress Folly and happiness and success will be yours. *Job* questions whether God and worldly wealth have such a relationship. Job lives an exemplary life of faith and yet is struck by misfortune after misfortune. In the end, all *Job* can do is trust to God. He cannot fathom God, he cannot know the full mysteries of existence, but what *Job* does assert is that following the rules, making the right choices do not necessarily mean prosperity and neither does prosperity therefore automatically prove you have found God – as the young man in today’s story illustrates.

Those from the *Proverbs* tradition assumed that worldly wealth was an outward sign of a good and pious life, and that the poor were deservedly poor because of their sins, either public or secret. Jesus sees no such simplistic correlation. Indeed, Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor.” Jesus believes that worldly wealth, rather than being a sign that all is right with the soul, can actually be a barrier to God. Those with great wealth tend to put too much trust in their own capabilities and too little trust in what God can do for them.

This was not an unknown point of view. The Essenes and other monastic type communities had a similar view, but here we see that Jesus firmly belongs in that camp.

The worldly wealth of the young man, rather than being a blessing from God for living such a good life, was actually getting in the way of him trusting God. That is why it was necessary for him to give away all his wealth if he wanted to find eternal life. Jesus said: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom.” Elsewhere Jesus says, “Store up treasures in heaven where moths and rust do not destroy, and where thieve do not break in and steal.”

This encounter strikes us hard who live in a world that has never had so much material wealth, so much scientific understanding of the mysteries of life and so many remedies for the ills and ailments that beset us. It is no surprise therefore that such a world is tempted to trust more in its own powers and see little need for trust in God. As worldly wealth rises, faith tends to subside, like the wheat smothered by the weeds.

ii

This brings us to the second part of Jesus’ advice to the young man. Firstly Jesus said, give away all your wealth, but secondly he said, “follow me.” Both parts of the advice are as important as the other. Removing all idolatrous barriers between himself and God is the first step, but that must be followed by the second step – which is a revolutionary new step – “follow me” – that is, follow Jesus.

Jesus did not say, give away your wealth and believe in God, but believe in “me”.

We can see how the story builds up to this revolutionary point by how the encounter begins.

The young man accidentally stumbles upon the truth when he innocently addresses Jesus “good teacher”. He probably intended this as a mark of respect rather than a deep Christological statement, but that is how Jesus used the greeting.

“Why do you call me ‘good’”, asks Jesus, “No one is good except God.” So go figure!

This is followed by Jesus asking if the young man has kept the 10 Commandments – yet Jesus significantly omits the first 4 Commandments which are all to do with accepting God, having no other God and having no graven image or idol in place of God, or taking God’s name in vain: Those Commandments Jesus replaces with the command to “follow me.”

Even the 4th Commandment to keep the Sabbath is omitted by Christ because that Commandment is also undergoing a Christian reformulation. No longer will keeping the Sabbath be done on a Saturday in the Jewish fashion, but will become a celebration of Jesus’ suffering and resurrection in the Sunday Eucharist.

iii

The disciples were initially dismayed at what they saw. If such a good living young man had no entry into the kingdom, what hope had they as fishermen and tax collectors?

Yet they had done the very thing the young man was unable to do. He was unable to let go of other worldly securities and trust himself to Jesus. The disciples, however, had left home and jobs behind to follow him. Had they done the right thing?

Jesus reassures them. Those who have left brothers and sisters behind, fathers, mothers and children for his sake will receive them back a hundredfold as they find a new family within the kingdom. And no one who forsakes worldly riches for the sake of Christ will go unrewarded in heaven. And this is the way to eternal life, which is what that young man and humanity as a whole has craved since the dawn of history.

According to the world, people will make foolish choices by not pursuing wealth and power and luxury and some that do will attribute such blessings to God’s reward, but Jesus says, do not put your trust in any worldly wealth, agency or knowledge – for if we do – we turn those blessings into idols that keep us away from God. To trust Jesus to bring us safely through is the path to eternal life.

It is not the way the world does things, but it is God’s way. It’s a question of whether we have the courage or not to give it a go.

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