

## **Sermon in Morning Service: October 10th.**

**Epistle: Hebrews 4, v. 12 - end. Gospel: Mark 10, v. 17 - 31.**

A man came up to Jesus. Mark says he ran up to him and showed his respect by kneeling in front of him. Matthew says that he was a young man, and Luke says that he was a ruler of the people, someone of status in the society. But all three gospel writers say that this young man had many possessions, was very rich.

Perhaps the main thing that the disciples remembered about this encounter was that having talked to Jesus this young man, of privileged position, went away sad. They were so used to seeing people bring their problems and their illnesses to Jesus, and seeing people walking away as if life had been transformed for them. It was a most unusual sight to see someone leave Jesus's presence sad. Why was that? The answer given by Matthew and Mark was - because the young man had many possessions, and by Luke because "he was very rich".

In our Epistle reading from Hebrews we learned that the words which come from God are "Living and active". A conversation with Jesus was a challenging experience, because it was so profound and full of life. But Hebrews also tells us that the Words of God are sharp, like a two-edged sword, and they divide the thoughts and attitudes of the heart from what can physically be seen in someone. Was the young man sad because he had felt the sharpness of Jesus's insight into his soul?

The young man wanted the right thing: he was longing to share the life that was in God. That I think is what 'eternal life' meant. It was life in all its intense vitality. In John's gospel the phrase 'abundant life' is used. That is what this young man was seeking for. And, Jesus did seem to react to the young man's question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?".

But was it the phrase “What must I **do**” that Jesus reacted to? Was the young man asking whether there was some good deed, or deeds, that he could carry out and so be given eternal life as a reward?

In fact Jesus picks up the word ‘Good’ from the man’s description of him as a good “Good teacher”. Perhaps Jesus is questioning whether it is individual good deeds that make people good. And He is suggesting that what matters is closeness to God whose goodness is a root of His being.

But if good acts are what is being talked about, then Jesus reminds the young man of the commandments, particularly those that address the issue of how we treat others. And the man can truthfully, reply, “I have kept all those since I was a boy”. If he was brought up in a devout family there was no reason to doubt that he had indeed not broken any of those commandments.

The gospel writers were very keen to record that Jesus was not irritated by, or disbelieving, of this young man. He saw the man’s commitment to living a religious life and his desire for spiritual growth, and so the gospel says that Jesus “loved him”. There was something enthusiastic and honest about him. Jesus wanted to give him something that would help him in his quest. How could he be filled with the life that comes from God - eternal life?

Having heard how the young man has kept all the Jewish law, Mark and Luke say that Jesus directly tells him that he lacks “one thing”. The problem, Jesus says, is his possessions - and his attitude to them. What is needed is for the young man to break his dependence on possessions by selling them and giving the money gained to the poor. That would be the way for him to exchange the possessions he has on earth for treasure in heaven.

But notice there is more. It was not just that he was told to sell his possessions. He was, after that renunciation, to become a true disciple of Jesus. “Come, follow me”. All the three gospel writers record those words: “Come follow me”. That is what the other disciples had done. They had made their relationship with Jesus the prime objective of their lives. They had left everything, including their homes and families, for a travelling life with Jesus.

No wonder the young man goes away sad. As they watch him walk away, Jesus says “How hard it is for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God”. Some versions put the focus on “Those who trust in riches”, as though the key point is, where are they putting their trust.

The young man talked about inheriting eternal life, and Jesus talked about ‘entering the kingdom of heaven’. I think the two phrases refer to the same idea. We tend to imagine that entering the kingdom of heaven is like going into a place. That is perhaps because of the city wall image that Jesus uses, about a camel not being able to go in to a town through the eye of a needle. It was a common comparison, which people might use to describe anything that was impossible. Jesus uses it so we can understand how difficult it could be for those who relied on their riches to enter God’s kingdom. To help us I think it would be better to think of ‘eternal life’ as a state of existence, life with a new dimension.

In the second part of our reading from Hebrews it talks about where Jesus is leading his disciples to, where we will end up if we follow Him. It is like following the high priest as he goes into that most sacred and mysterious space in the temple. If we hold firmly to the faith we profess we can follow Him there. So we may go with Him to ‘the throne of grace’. Of course that is the very centre of creation, the place where God Himself sits. And at that throne we may receive mercy, “and grace to help us in our time of need”. Surely these verses are talking about us receiving eternal life.

Eternal life, or entrance into the Kingdom of God, is a gift of grace. Freely given, not earned and not a reward for actions carried out during our lives. No matter how big the donations to the church or the charity. And surely the realisation of our need is at the root of it. We bring ourselves, empty-handed to the throne of God. If we fill our hands with possessions, if we trust in what we own, then how are we going to have hands empty enough to receive the grace of God?

Amen