

## Mark 10:17-31

Money and religion can be a heady and almost fatal mix.

We hear some televangelists boasting about how they need donors to give them a private jet so they can get quickly to the places asking them to speak.

We hear of pastors and ministers being controlled by the wealthy people in their church who guarantee them a new car every two years.

We know of the dangers of what is called the “prosperity gospel” with its teaching that God wants you to have now the health, riches and knowledge you will only have in the life to come.

We read of St Paul’s associate Demas who, though he had once been part of Paul’s inner circle of church workers is sadly described as having left Paul because he had fallen in love with this present world.

And have you heard of the businessman who stood up in a church sharing time to tell his story. “When I was young, I decided to give all of my first salary payment to God, so I drew it out in cash and put it in the offering plate. Since then, God has blessed me beyond my wildest dreams.”

And he heard an old lady sitting behind him whisper: “I dare you to put all your money in the plate today.”

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And of course when we think of wealth and Christianity our mind will go to this young man in our gospel reading today. Among the saddest words written in all the Bible are those of verse 22: "He went away sad, because he had great wealth."

How tragic. This young man came to Jesus with the very best question. Any minister would give almost anything to have someone ask the question this man so eagerly and respectfully asked of Jesus: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" A marvellous question. One all of us would love to hear from that person we've been praying for to become a true follower of Jesus. One I hope we ourselves have asked in one form or another - and acted on the answer.

The Lord Jesus clearly spells out what this man is so desperately asking.

He's asking about whether he's be in heaven - verse 21 says: "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

Or as he says in verse 23: "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Same in verse 24: "How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God." And verses 25: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God".

And the disciples understand as well, as they say in verse 26: "Who then can be saved?"

The young man is asking the central and utterly essential question of the Christian faith: "What does it take to bring a person to know God, to be

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known by God, to be forgiven and welcomed by God as his child, to have eternal life, to be saved, to enter into having God as your king, your boss?" "How do I become a Christian?" Is the way we would express it today.

As I say, that's a question each of us needs to have asked.

This young man understands he's not yet in the kingdom; not yet a believer. He wasn't born a believer, his parents didn't make him a believer, and he wants to know how does he become one? For he understands who Jesus is.

We need to see how surprising - no how shocking - and yet how reassuring Jesus' answer to him is.

It's there in verse 21: "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."

Is it that Jesus is saying that riches, wealth, money are evil in themselves? Some Christians down the centuries have thought that and taught others. But Jesus did accept the support of wealthy followers who became benefactors, and the apostle Paul did the same at various points.

No, it's the place, the role, that wealth has in a person's heart that he's talking about.

And because wealth, riches mean power, it's hard for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.

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They can, and they do, but Jesus says it's hard. We all know this, because even those of us with very little find ourselves thinking - "If only I had more . . ."

This young man gave every sign of being sincere and genuine. And more, he was obviously a keen keeper of God's law in his relationships with others. His life, his behaviour led the disciples to think: "This man would surely be acceptable."

But Jesus sees the heart. He sees what the man is asking. And he sees that this man will not be able to give up his wealth to gain membership in the kingdom of God. He will not be able.

That's why Jesus allows the disciples to voice the question: "Who then can be saved?"

If this man can't - when he has such a good reputation, such a good record, who can be saved? Can anyone?

And Jesus' answer to them is both the shock they needed and the reassurance they needed. The shock we need and the reassurance we need.

"For mortals it is impossible - but not for God; for God all things are possible."

No matter how eager a person may be - no matter how good and godly they may appear, Jesus says it's impossible for us to enter the kingdom of God.

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Nothing I can do, nothing any of us can do will ever be enough. And the lesson of the young rich man is that we don't have the power of ourselves to break the hold other things have on our hearts and lives and free us to belong to God and God above all.

That's hard to hear - as the disciples found!

But it's also tremendously reassuring.

My being in the right with God does not depend on what I do.

It depends on God.

And as we are reminded in the communion today it depends on what God has done for us in the death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As St Paul was to write to the Ephesians in chapter 2 and verse 8: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not from you, it is from God. And it is not because of works (doing good) lest any person should boast."

As the Lord Jesus says to us: "With mortals it is impossible, but not with God: all things are possible with God."

So what are we to do?

Realise we cannot get ourselves or anyone else into heaven, to enter the kingdom of God, to be saved.

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It is all of God.

So we are to cast ourselves on his mercy and ask him on the basis of what Jesus has done to grant us entry into his kingdom, salvation.

He is the God who does the impossible!

He is the God who saves sinners and makes them his children.