**Hebrews 4.12-16 p.126
Mark 10.17-31p.39
13th October 2024**

## Getting through the Eye of the Needle

**Introduction to the Theme: Asking the wrong question**

Whilst visiting Tanzania we hired a driver for the day. He told us to call him Bernard and he drove us from our lodge on the outskirts of Arusha into town, took us to lunch at a place where he said *the locals go,* finishing off with a visit to a Tanzanite jewellery shop where, I think it would be safe to say, only the visitors go.

Bernard was a talker and a delightfully friendly guide so as we trundled into town we made polite conversation. He was glad we were visiting Tanzania and told us to tell our friends to do so, because, in his view, overseas visitors made Tanzania’s economy stronger.

And then perhaps I dropped an insensitive clanger. I asked Bernard if he’d ever visited Britian. Clearly such a prospect was so far off the list of what would ever be possible in his life that he just laughed and said if he ever had the sort of money that could purchase an air ticket he’d spend it, instead, on his children’s education or to buy food for his household.

If I hadn’t realised it before, that moment made it clear to me that we in the West have a general wealth that societies in the Developing World only dream of.

And in that sense, today’s reading from Mark 10 will sound, and feel, different to us who live here in Amersham, in one of the wealthiest locations in Britain, than it would to Bernard driving his taxi in Tanzania where the average take home pay is £160 a month.

In today’s gospel, which we’ll hear in a few minutes, Jesus is approached by a wealthy man. In many ways we might have thought this encounter would sound far more positive than it does. After all this rich man seems to be asking all the right questions and even refers to Jesus as a good teacher. Then, when challenged, he insists that since childhood he’s been a sincere follower of The Torah. Surely, we might think, Jesus is going to give him a bit of a break, commend him for his enquiring mind and even compliment him on an unblemished record so far.

But no, it doesn’t work out like this and maybe when you hear the reading in a moment or two you might even think Jesus was surprisingly hard on the rich young man. Instead of complimenting him on his seeking after truth Jesus challenges the man about keeping the letter of the law without accompanying that with compassion for the poor.

And then comes one of the most graphic, but maybe most misunderstood, images Jesus ever uses in his teaching when he says it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the Kingdom of God.

So, where’s the sacredness to be found in today’s scriptures? Is money such a bad thing that it always, and inevitably, pollutes faith?

Well, in our sermon today we’ll have a go at seeing if us camels have even the faintest of chances of going through that eye of a needle.

**Sermon***Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made
flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your
voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds.
In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

We’d left Maryleboneand now, on the Bakerloo line I was on my way to Charing Cross for a lunchtime service at St Martin in the Fields and I looked up on the advertising boards above the seats. One read: *Let’s make money together.* And another, two boards along: *Let’s end hunger together.*They were adverts from two different organisations placed, perhaps ironically, so close together and yet their message to us Tube passengers seemed miles apart. Or is there a contradiction in personally making money whilst also working to end hunger? By the time we pulled into Charing Cross my mind was still pondering that age old conundrum and it’s an issue which is central in today’s gospel reading from Mark 10.

In this passage Jesus doesn’t seem to easily accept compliments. Although we’re told he did look lovingly on this rich man, he kicks back his admiration of him as good. Instead, he says, only God deserves such an accolade.

I guess most of us like a pat on the back and a few nice words in our direction sometimes softens us up, but not, apparently Jesus. Loving this man didn’t mean avoiding challenging him about his wealth.

That’s so often an issue for all of us. When we love, respect or admire someone it can be quite tough to be honest with them.

Jesus, I think we could say, doesn’t shy away from that sort of honesty here, indeed perhaps he respected this man so much because of his enquiring mind and eager approach towards him, that his answer has something of a brutal clarity about it.

It's as if he agrees with the man’s protestation that he’s tried to live a good life whilst at the same time urging him to think deeper about what he’s really done to help the poor or to live compassionately with neighbours.

It's often said that of all the gospels, Mark seems to portray Jesus as actually making it surprisingly quite difficult for people to get on board with his message and invitation. His was a tough call to follow. And today’s gospel passage looks like an example of that.

Jesus is undoubtedly being somewhat provocative here. He’s the controversial Rabbi who isn’t afraid at upsetting a few apple carts.

That’s because, in a sense, he’s challenging something of a religious norm amongst his contemporaries that faith and prosperity were often viewed, of course especially by those who were rich, as acceptable bed fellows.

Wasn’t this the message of the Old Testament patriarchs from the beginning, promising the people a land flowing with milk and honey. The prophets took up the strain and urged their listeners to keep the faith in the hope that prosperity would be their blessing. Even Psalm 23 talks of that vision of God preparing an abundantly ladened table for us and inviting us to drink from an overflowing cup.

Of course, wealth in Jesus’ day would probably, and inevitably, be synonymous with owning slaves. Wealth equalled a degree of control and manipulation over other human beings as a right of owning them as if they were things instead of people.

Wealth can make any of us feel detached, insulated or even protected from the sort of pain or struggle that others, not so financially fortunate as us, might feel. We begin to be people with different priorities and understandings of what is important in life.

And it’s at this point that Jesus invokes a wonderfully effective metaphor. He says it’s *easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.*Maybe it actually meant the difficulty a camel would have passing through a small door in Jerusalem’s walls, one used only at night when the gates had been ordered shut. Yet archaeologists tell us no such door has ever been identified.

Or maybe it’s a mistranslation and instead of a camel it should read a rope. Thick rope, as used on board ships to teether them to shore. Such rope cannot be threaded through the eye of a sewing needle. It’s too big and bloated.

It's Jesus’ way of saying, I think, that being rich would always be a challenge to signing up to this way of belief and living codified as the Kingdom of God.

I don’t think Jesus says that’s impossible. He certainly never says riches exclude people from his kingdom. He simply, and dramatically, makes the point that wealth inevitably makes us feel differently, not always in a good way, about ourselves, others and God. And he ends this passage with the ironic idea that in God’s Kingdom the last come first.

So, today’s passage is really a Q and A session between this man and Jesus and perhaps it’s gone down in history as being primarily about money. And whilst wealth is certainly central to their dialogue I wonder if the conversation was only about his bank balance?

This man, as financially secure as he was, doesn’t feel sure about his faith. Even after years trying to live according to the rules he’s grown up with he, he still feels poor and inadequate when it comes to faith, that’s why he turns to Jesus.

So, what’s going on here? Well, isn’t Jesus saying to him, you may have a *Culture of Faith*, but you don’t have the *Ethics of Faith*. You say the right things without doing the right things. Somehow you haven’t made a connection, and it’s a pretty basic connection, yet we can all be guilty of this, it’s that fundamental link between what your believe and how you live.

Someone has said that in a way Jesus was telling the rich guy in today’s story something very simple, he was telling him to *aim lower.*This man seems overly focused on a pedantic and fussy way of keeping of the law, yet oblivious to the needs of his neighbours. He’s so heavenly focussed that he’s become of no earthly use, so aim lower. Try helping the people down the street, reach out to the hungry, stand in solidarity with the poor. Aim lower – it’s great advice. He needed the ethics of faith, not just to live in a pseudo culture of faith.

So, looked at one way, this isn’t essentially a passage about money but about making connections. Living an integrated life in which every constituent part of us, including our money, is open to the difference faith makes to a person’s head and heart.

Of course it’s self-evident in Scripture that not everyone gave up, or gave away, all their wealth, and these people are never challenged by Jesus for keeping it, possibly because of the way they used it. Mary and Martha had a house that seems to have had a guest bedroom, so much so that in Bethany Jesus found a home from home that was for him a great blessing. Or how about those female followers of his who provided the financial backing enabling the mission of Jesus and the 12 to take place.

Today’s gospel asks us to make connections in the whole of life, between our faith and our relationships, our leisure, our family life, our careers and even our politics. It calls for an integrated life in which even our view of money will be tempered by the prayers we say, the hymns we sing and the bible texts we remember.

Our passage this morning is paired with words from the Letter to the Hebrews in which The Bible is likened to a razor like two-edged sword that can cut through anything.

I think Zaccheus, that rich citizen of Jericho, felt something like this as he listened to Jesus’ words whilst entertaining him at home. Those words, probably about love, kindness and justice for all, seem to have cut deep into the soul of Zaccheus, so much so that as he and Jesus emerge from their meet up Zaccheus the swindler becomes the town’s greatest benefactor. He seems changed, his life is now better connected and what he just paid lip service to for years in his faith, he now puts into practice with zeal and energy in his new life.

So, in the light of that can I ask you a personal question? You don’t have to give me an answer? But the question is: do you ever think about the bible passages we read here in church, or the sermons based on them, beyond leaving church? I confess I can move on very quickly. I leave this week’s topic behind and start planning next week’s – something of an occupational hazard.

Yet, it would be good, I think (and I say this to myself just as much as to you), if we did try to take, perhaps, just one thing away with us from scripture or sermon every week ,and once or twice, before we meet here again, give it a second thought. Ask ourselves how it might change us, mould us, or encourage us. Perhaps then we’d avoid the pitfalls of the rich young man who had lost his way between the culture and ethics of faith.

Let me close as I recollect some words I once heard at a Ministers’ Conference. Our speaker was a College Principal and one-time national President of our churches, he was undoubtedly a bigwig among us, but this wasn’t so much a story about him as about his wife, and what she taught him.

He went home one evening and his wife was watching the news and a report from a famine stricken African country. He said he’d never seen her so affected by what she was watching. It went deep, perhaps it cut through like a two-edged sword and maybe that news report was for her The Word of God speaking to her heart.

He tried to comfort her, perhaps even using some of his academic skill to make it all less personal. But she was having none of it. She was absolutely adamant that they, together, agreed to set aside a significant sum of money that would increase the amount they gave away every month, so that they could better support the work of Christian Aid.

I think he told us this story against himself. He was the one with the degrees, with the principalship and national church presidency, yet his wife had become his greatest teacher. She had made that connection between her faith and her life, a connection that needed to unlock the couples’ bank account so that together they could be generous in their increased support for Cristian Aid.

May we be open to this tough call of God upon our lives, as we too try to make connections between what we say and how we live – and maybe then we’ll find ourselves just about small enough to get through the eye of the needle. Amen.

 *Ian Green, Amersham,11th October 2024*