**

Amos 5.6-7, 10-15
Mark 10.17-31
14th October 2018**

## The Eye of the Needle

*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.*
Here’s a one liner from a bible commentator I read this week: Mark’s a relentless Gospel, which seems not so much to invite to faith as to prove again and again the impossibility of faith.

Maybe if Mark was responsible for the big notice board on the front of our church it might say: Join us for the toughest ride of your life. Or… Become a member, it’s the most difficult thing you’ll ever do.

Mark’s Jesus is no soft option.

In today’s gospel, read to us by Liz, Jesus appears to almost dissuade the rich stranger from becoming a disciple. Rather than invite him along with winsome words of encouragement he speaks of how difficult it will be for a wealthy person to find spiritual integrity.

At first sight, maybe, Jesus’ approach to evangelism in Mark 10 seems almost an own goal rather than a winning formula.

He challenges this enquirer with that memorable – if ambiguous idea – that it’s easier for a camel to enter the eye of a needle than for a rich person to pass into the Kingdom of God.

This metaphor is sometimes explained away as referring to a small door cut into the city gates of Jerusalem. After curfew, when the main gates had closed, late travellers would have to dismount from their camels, take all their bags off the animal so that it could squat down and squeeze itself through this small opening.

The truth is, however, there is no archaeological evidence that such a door ever existed.

An early church father, Cyril of Alexandria, maintains the metaphor literally meant the eye of a metal needle used for sewing. But his take is intriguing because it claims that the word ‘camel’ is a mistranslation and what it really says is: it’s easier for a thick rope to be passed through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter God’s kingdom.

Well, either way the point is the same – it’s a metaphor about something that’s either very hard or actually totally impossible. And it fits this idea that the Jesus of Mark emphasises such a stern challenge when calling people to discipleship rather than issuing a warm-hearted and soft-consequence invitation to us to become his followers.

That said, when we first encounter the rich stranger in Mark 10 perhaps we feel he’s got a lot going for him.

He seems to ‘reverence’ Jesus. He kneels before him and calls him good.

As he and the preacher from Nazareth talk of this Kingdom of Heaven it initially seems as if the stranger meets the criteria because, he says, since a boy I’ve kept all the commandments. So, is that literally 10 out of 10 for him – go to the top of the class and collect your membership card on the way out?

At this point he sounds a bit like Paul later in the New Testament, who also claimed to be an enthusiast when it came to law keeping. I suspect that neither of them would have gone to Freshers Week at University and let their hair down, instead they’d be locked in their rooms with their books from day one.

The upshot of this encounter isn’t one more name to be added to the register of disciples because, alas, we are told the rich man went away grieving. We are left with the presumption that as he couldn’t give up his shekels he forfeited his place as a follower of Jesus.

Now we in the West of 2018 would, I suspect, fit the bill of being rich.

That came across to me one day in Africa during August when I asked our guide for the day if he had ever been to Europe. You know we get so used to being around people who have the means to travel it just becomes a regular question: Have you been to Canada? How did you like Costa Rica?

The taxi driver cum guide just smiled when I asked if he’d visited Britain and then said: If I had that sort of money I’d use it to get my children through school or buy food for the family.

From that point on I was a little more circumspect about the sort of questions I asked and the assumptions I was making behind them.

And we read today’s passage in Amersham. Zoopla, the internet House Price website says that in the last twelve months an average sale of a property in our town would have gone for around £684,000 compared with the national figure of £365,000.

Of course, not all of us are home owners or high earners, yet compared to many East Africans who live on just the equivalent of $2 dollars a day – all of us are relatively rich. So, can we, you and I, go through the eye of a needle, or like the wealthy enquirer in today’s story, do we leave church this morning grieving?

So, what do we make of Jesus as he engages with the wealthy man in Mark 10?

It might be argued that he was ungenerously abrupt and consequently spoils a potentially positive situation. After all the man came with respect, asked questions and at one point we are told Jesus really seemed to love this seeker after truth. In fact, in the whole of Mark’s gospel this is the only reference to Jesus ‘loving’ someone.

And yet…this rapport didn’t make Jesus avoid the one issue that seemed to be a road block on the man’s journey of faith. Jesus says it as it is instead of skirting round the subject.

I spent part of last week at a conference with forty other Baptist Ministers. I just marvel at those who accepted the invitation to speak last week – we couldn’t have been the easiest of groups to address.

Well, during one of my lunchtime conversations with colleagues around the table we were talking about the practice some of us have of going and seeing a Spiritual Director every couple of months. It’s meant to be a way of keeping us spiritual healthy. A time to say what’s going on in our lives and have some helpful feedback and direction.

I was struck that one person on my table lamented that their Spiritual Director was just too kind and not challenging enough. He said: I’ve got a cuddly Anglican priest but what I really need is a ruthless Catholic nun!

Well, in today’s passage Jesus is more like an astute Catholic nun than a cuddly Anglican. He’s not afraid of asking the difficult questions just because he likes the man.

Perhaps there is some validity in the idea that often we Christians bury the truth, or at least avoid the issues when we are just too nice with each other.

Real love is prepared to ask the tough questions.

As their conversation progresses we have to sort of fill in the blanks.

We might have thought the answer ‘I’ve been keeping the commandments since my youth’ would have found a favourable response from Jesus. But it didn’t.

This, many argue, is yet another bible passage that is all about the difference between keeping the letter, rather than the spirit of the law.

The essence of so much of the Jewish tradition was about compassion. The Torah presents a down to earth faith that has an ethical consequence. Individual, family and community needs have to be addressed in a just society. No one can simply live for themselves alone. So, the first half of the 10 commandments deal with our relationship to God and the second half is all about our relationships with one another.

Compassion for the poor – how important is that in your life? That’s what Jesus was really asking the rich man.

OK, it was good he was interested in eternal life. And in John’s gospel that phrase is a deep one always just as much about the quality of life as quantity.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke maybe it’s not such a poetic term and one commentator I’ve read this week has suggested that perhaps Jesus was challenging this man, ironically, to ‘aim lower’. All this talk of eternal life sounds grand and a touch ethereal. Yet, how we live today, in the here and now, that’s also part of the eternal life of God’s Kingdom. ‘Aim lower’ rich man – don’t become so heavenly minded that you are of no earthly use. Use your wealth to refashion the world around you so that something of God’s Kingdom breaks in this day, in this place.

And once you’ve done that perhaps he needed to leave some of his struggle and angst behind. He talks so much about how he might be successful in somehow inheriting eternal life. What could he do to gain it?

Yet, maybe the clue to his search was already there in the words he was using. You ‘inherit’ as a gift. You inherit often because you are part of the family.

Part of following Jesus is to come to that wonderful realisation that faith actually isn’t a reward for intellectual struggle or even ethical correctness. Faith is to cherish the gift of the life given to us at birth, to discover and develop its many connections and the depth given it by love. Faith is to feel the warmth of God the Father’s loving welcome. To be inspired by the servant life of God the Son and then sustained in this eternal life by God the Spirit. Faith is about God, his welcome and that inheritance of love that he pours into all our lives. We don’t earn it, we cannot buy it – we simply have the wonderful privilege of opening our hands, hearts and minds to receive it and then revel in it.

Yet somehow – our rich man – couldn’t walk that road. Maybe he wanted to buy faith with his credit card. Perhaps he wanted to control it or feel as if he had earnt it. Something was blocking his journey and he went away grieving, still struggling and living with the forlorn and unsatisfying intensity of his daily law keeping.

Time for us, I think, to pull our thoughts together on this morning’s gospel.

At the Minister’s Conference this week we were thrilled to have the Sociologist and Christian writer, Ann Morisy as one of our speakers. She has a gentle Liverpudlian humour alongside a keen and astute mind.

She spoke of the ‘Aerosol’ words and phrases we sometimes use in Church. We spray them about and they make us feel good, yet maybe we’re not entirely sure exactly what we mean by them. Words like ‘Community’ – maybe ‘Compassion’, and I suspect a couple of phrases from Mark 10 this morning, ‘Kingdom of God’ and ‘Eternal Life’ could also be aerosol words.

We all use them – I love spraying them around!

Perhaps the rich man also did that. He was keen to talk about all these things.

But, in the end, that wasn’t enough just to spray and to talk.

We all must stop just talking about compassion and live it instead. Isn’t that what ‘following’ Jesus is all about.

And living compassionately towards the poor today is just as much, say, about standing with refugees and the mentally ill as it’s always been about standing alongside those in the Developing World.

Perhaps the reason I go around spraying the aerosol so much is that it can be incredibly hard, and even contentious, to define the second part of that one commandment that sums up all the others: to love God and then to love neighbour.

We may falter at defining or prescribing such compassion, but my guess is we all know it when we see it.

We know what it looks like:
- that love that never gives up-

* That compassion which is truly selfless
* That quiet giving by a wealthy friend who is just as much at home washing up church coffee cups as writing cheques
* That passion which leads to a life campaigning for those on the margins by writing letters and going on marches with as much commitment as attending church

But I’m not sure the rich man in today’s passage was prepared to give any of that a go.

Thomas Merton was an American Trappist Monk who wrote many books about this blending of faith with social activism. He did much more than spray aerosol words around the room and yet he did realise that it’s never easy to define compassion or even discipleship – it has to be lived and explored.

This is one of Merton’s prayers:

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.*

It’s a start – to want to please God in both our thinking and our living. And pray God, that desire can be matched in all our journeys by a life that is lived with compassion. And then, in God’s grace, perhaps we won’t get too stuck as we squeeze through the eye of that intriguing and mysterious needle!

May it be so, in the name of The Father, Son and Spirit. Amen.
 *Ian Green, Amersham, 11th October 2018*