

Sermon for Proper 23, Year B

The Text: Mark 10:21-22

There was a miserly man who made good money all of his life but hoarded it. He wouldn't spend a cent of it. He kept his wife to a strict budget so she could only buy the barest of essentials at the supermarket and just enough to pay for the electricity and council rates. He wouldn't even keep his money in a bank because he didn't want to pay the bank fees. He kept his money hidden away in a box behind some loose bricks in the fireplace.

As it turns out, the man suffered a heart attack and was dying. He called his wife and told her about the money. She was ecstatic until he told her to put it by the upstairs bedroom window so he could grab it as he went by on his way to heaven.

Despite his miserly way, his wife loved him very much and decided to comply with his last request. He died about two hours later. Three days after the funeral, she happened to be in the upstairs bedroom doing some cleaning when she remembered the box. It was still there. So was the money. She clutched the box, shook her head and in her grief said, "Oh, George, George, George. I knew I should have put it down by the cellar door."

How many of you have ever fantasized about being filthy rich or independently wealthy? So wealthy that you didn't have to plan to make the payment of the bills coincide with payday?

Have you ever said something like, "If I had half the money that some of the top sports players or models have, the first thing I would do would be to pay off everything I owe, buy a house, retire, travel, and give lots away to my children and set them up for life?"

Wouldn't you like to have unlimited resources not just for yourself but also to have the ability to help make other people's lives better? Wouldn't it be great to be able to dish out millions of dollars to build a hostel for the homeless, or to make a difference in the lives of those people in some overseas village where people are so poor and lack the essentials to sustain life – maybe providing fresh water, electricity, schools, health clinics, and an orphanage? There's a certain joy in being able to help others.

Today's gospel reading tells us about a man who didn't just wish he was rich but he was already a wealthy man. It's worth noting what people thought of those who were wealthy in Jesus' time. It was assumed people became rich because God had especially blessed them. It was also thought that if anyone was going to heaven it was the wealthy person because their riches were proof that God favoured them. It must have seemed rather strange that a rich man – a man so obviously blessed by God - should ask, "*What must I do to receive eternal life?*"

Jesus at first responds with the conventional answer that any rabbi would have given: obey all the commandments. Of course, obeying all the commandments would be no small order, and yet surprisingly, this young man says that he has done just that from the days of his youth. Then, in the words of the gospel writer, Jesus *looked straight at him with love and said, "You need only one thing. Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me."* (Mark 10:21,22)

Those words must have hit the rich man full force in the face. Go, sell, give, come, follow. Those five small words must have been like five powerful blows from the gloves of a champion boxer. Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam! Go, sell, give, come, follow. *"Go, sell all of your assets, give the money to the poor, and come and follow me. Do this and you will have riches in heaven."*

I don't know how you find these words but to me they are some of the most difficult and confronting that Jesus ever spoke. Not so difficult to understand but impossible for mere human beings to carry out. Put yourself in that rich man's shoes. What a situation for the rich man to be put in – to choose Jesus or to choose what he had inherited from his father, his comfortable lifestyle, his properties and bank accounts, the way of life that he had grown up with and now enjoyed. It's easy to say that he should have immediately given it all up and followed Jesus, but how easy would we find it if we were in his situation?

When Jesus says, Go, sell, give, come, follow he is speaking to all of us regardless of how wealthy we are. As he did to the wealthy young man in our text, Jesus is exposing the false gods – the idols – that we worship. He is calling us to repentant of our idolatry, and by faith in him receive his forgiveness for our sin. And he calls us to a life of faith in him.

Make no bones about it, this young man was confronted with a tough choice – humanly speaking, an impossible choice. We are told, *"When the man heard this, gloom spread over his face, and he went away sad, because he was very rich."* (Mark 10:22) Other translations, like the Revised Standard Version, say that *"his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful."* This young man comes to Jesus filled with hope and goes away sad.

Can you visualise the expression on the man's face? We've seen gloom come over people's faces before. A student comes up to the teacher eagerly awaiting the results of their exam. The teacher says, "I'm sorry, you didn't do that well. You got an F." What happens to the student? Their countenance falls.

You are looking at the car you would really love to have and ask the salesman, "How much?"

"You are in luck. That one's on sale. We have slashed \$10,000 off the price."

Your face brightens. Is it possible you can afford this dream car?

The salesman happily says, "You can get that little baby for a mere \$75,000".

Your face drops.

I can imagine that if Jesus was here today, and we asked him the same question, and he gave the same answer as he gave the man in the story, more than likely our faces would also drop. This is tough thing to ask of any one. These are the toughest five words. Go, sell, give, come, follow.

Jesus goes on and says, *"My children, how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God! It is much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle."* (Mark 10:25). People have tried to explain what Jesus meant here.

Some say the word camel in Greek is very similar to the word for "rope" and so Jesus is saying how difficult it is to thread a rope through the eye of a needle. Others refer to a small door in the walls of Jerusalem. It was so small that it was impossible for a fully loaded camel to go through.

But why not let the imagery stand as it is. Jesus is trying to get across the idea of something that is impossible. The camel was the largest animal found in Palestine; the eye of a needle the smallest opening. A rich person has about as much chance of entering the Kingdom of God as a camel has of passing through the eye a needle.

And it is at this point that we find out how the disciples felt about all of this. We hear that they were *"shocked"* and *"completely amazed and asked one another, "Who, then, can be saved?"* You can see that everyone is absolutely flabbergasted at Jesus command to go, sell, give, come and follow. They are shocked, even appalled. And who can blame them?

You see, Jesus is laying it on pretty thick that discipleship means having faith in Jesus and being totally committed to following his ways – loving as he loves, forgiving as he forgives and serving as he serves. Jesus is warning that it is Satan's delight to use the things we possess and our work and our leisure activities to possess us and so distract us from following Jesus. We might not think of ourselves as rich but we are indeed rich compared to the vast majority in the world. We don't have to be millionaires for our work, our sport, our hobbies, and even our families to stand between us and our loyalty to God.

A widow once bought a parrot called Chirpy from the local pet store to keep her company. She returned to the store the next day with this complaint, "The parrot you sold me yesterday hasn't said a word."

"Does he have a mirror in his cage?" the store keeper asked. "Parrots love mirrors. They see their reflection and start a conversation." The woman bought a mirror and left.

The next day she returned; the bird still wasn't talking. "How about a ladder? Parrots love ladders. A happy parrot is a talkative parrot." The woman bought a ladder and left.

But the next day, she was back again with the same complaint. "Does your parrot have a swing? No? Well, that's the problem. Once he starts swinging, he'll talk up a storm." The woman reluctantly bought a swing and left.

When she walked into the store the next day, her countenance had changed. "The parrot died," she said. The man at the pet shop was shocked.

"I'm so sorry. Tell me, did he ever say anything?" he asked.

"Yes, right before he died," the woman replied. "In a weak voice, he asked me, 'Don't they sell *any* food at that pet store?'"

Chirpy had everything that a parrot could want to make him happy, everything except the most important thing of all. Without that one important thing Chirpy was doomed.

We too can have everything – good income, success at work, school or on the sports field, honour, money, fame and happy families – and don't get me wrong Jesus isn't saying that any of these things are bad in themselves. However, if having these things means we endanger our relationship with Jesus and therefore our hope of eternal life, then we are better off without them. Chirpy's cage was full of all the gadgets that a parrot could want, but he ended up dead. That's like what Jesus is saying today. We can be rich in a worldly sense but miss out on what makes us truly rich – life with Jesus.

As the disciples were listening to Jesus, their countenance dropped. They, and we, know that we humans let all kinds of things get between us and our walking with Jesus. All of us are constantly in danger of filling our hearts with everything else except Jesus. We admit that we find it impossible to keep the First or any of the Commandments. Luther explains: '*We should fear, love and trust in God above all things*'. There isn't one person here who has done just that. For us to get to heaven by our own efforts would be like trying to squeeze a camel through the eye of a needle - an impossibility.

Jesus looked at his disciples straight in the eye and answered their question of "who can be saved then?" saying, "*This is impossible for a humans, but not for God; everything is possible for God.*"

God loves us! He sent his Son to die for us, to forgive us for failing to 'go, sell, give, come, follow,' and for putting other things first before Jesus. He calls us to repentance. As his new people with new priorities and a new love in our hearts he challenges us to go, sell, give, come, and follow. He forgives us for all of our misplaced priorities. He forgives us for the idols we cling to. He welcomes us into his kingdom saying, "*All those who live and believe in me have eternal life.*" Amen.