

IXX Pentecost (23b)

Mk 10.17-27

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Fr. Dow Sanderson

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Children, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven...

It has often been said that from the moment the Lord Jesus uttered those words, the church has been filled with camel squeezers. Engineers looking for the right angle, the right thrust, to accomplish an exceedingly difficult task.

As I have mentioned before, Father Ted McNabb, Rector of Christ Church Mt. Pleasant is a published song writer, and has produced a work on this text with the catchy refrain:

Come on Camel, I'm rootin' for you.

Come on Camel, Let's push it right through.

(Unlike Fr. McNabb, I shall not produce a guitar and sing for you... I am sure, to your exceeding disappointment!)

Having Jesus on our terms, costing us nothing, would be a rather easy commitment to make. We all could enthusiastically cheer for the camel.

But Our Lord will not have it that way.

The young man who runs and kneels before him in today's Gospel makes an appearance in all the synoptic Gospels. He is called "Rich" and "a Ruler"... Mark simply tells us that he had many possessions.

He seems to be sincere. After all, he is kneeling, imploring the Lord to help give his life what it is clearly lacking. Wholeness. The fullness of health. Eternal Salvation.

When Jesus rattles off the Commandments, the young man nods in agreement. He has them memorized, clearly having gotten a perfect attendance pin in Sunday School. He even goes so far as to claim to have kept them.... Or to be precise, he says he has "observed these from my youth"... which could mean that even when he transgressed, he was aware of the repentance necessary, based on the law as our corrective and guide.

Jesus looks at him and loves him.

Just as he looks into your soul and mine and loves us.

I would imagine that when the Lord sees our heart, he can sense the child-like awe and wonder, with which we were born... the joy and giddiness and unembarrassed honesty of the very young.

But as we grow older, having been hurt and wounded and tossed about by life just a bit, we grow a few calluses on the heart. We are a little more cautious, even suspicious of the motives of others.

Jesus can see past all that. And he always knows exactly what medicine each individual needs.

He saw that the Rich Young Ruler was possessed by his own wealth. He didn't think he could be himself without it. He had been identified by it for his whole life. Those descriptive nicknames that we loathe... Birdlegs...Beanpole... the Pudgy Kid Across the Street... that Big Headed Baby... So it was with this fellow... There goes the Rich Young Ruler, people might have said.

It is who he was. Or so he thought.

Jesus knew that he had a higher calling. A more fulfilling role to play. A deeper identity and vocation. If only he could trust... and let go of the one thing that kept him from truly becoming Himself.

Give up all you have to the poor and follow me... and you will have treasure in Heaven...

And he went away sorrowfully, for he had many possessions.

It IS easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, isn't it?

Having an abundance of money can, if we let it, disguise what is really important.

And wealth is capable of producing counterfeit emotions and feelings:

- We think it makes us important.
- We think it gives us Power
- It can cause us to think more highly of ourselves than we ought.
- We think it makes us secure... and the fear of NOT having it makes us anxious.

NONE of the feelings and emotions that having wealth produces are ultimately true.

Any power that money provides is very transitory.

And as for prestige... the scriptural record is quite clear that the poor are most exalted in the Kingdom of God.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat... and the rich He hath sent empty away.

...

So here we are. What is the question this Gospel demands from us?

Most of us do not have the kind of opulent wealth of a Bill Gates or a Warren Buffett... (but just in case I am wrong about that, I would happily be corrected!)

Nor is it likely that any of us will ever know the stinging poverty of the most desperate who lived when our Lord walked this earth... And there are still the desperately poor... for whom we all have a responsibility in our day.

But this is not a sermon about economics, really and truly. It is more about our highest spiritual priorities.

Just this week, I read a wonderful "letter to the editor" by Mother Miriam, an Episcopal nun in the Community of St. Mary. I had the privilege of meeting her at the General Convention of 1997, and I have

always thought she wrote like an angel. In this letter, she is addressing, not only the decline of religious vocations, but the decline of church membership in general. And I think she hits the nail on the head:

My question is, has she (the prospective nun) ever heard from her priest, or her bishop or her catechist a serious call to discipleship? How often has she heard, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross"? How often does she hear the joy of sacrifice, the glory of the Kingdom of God... that he who loses his life for Christ's sake will gain it?

Where the full Gospel is preached, some will turn away... but some will hear and follow. Our models are the Desert Fathers, St. Benedict, St. Francis (and Claire!) and many others in the Communion of Saints... Those who have ears, let them hear... and may all Church members pay attention to what they are commissioned to preach: an invitation to a full life, through the cross of Christ.

I think Mother Miriam is exactly right. Too often our preaching, our agenda, our aim in life is comfort and security. And we are not at all as committed to the full Gospel of sacrifice and holy risk taking for the Kingdom of God as we are called to be. And I know that I am as guilty as anyone.

It really is a matter of priorities and commitment.

If the Lord of the Universe looked into our hearts and told us that we had an impediment to true faith, and if we would only trust him, He would show us the way to more joy than we could imagine. Could we do it? Could we release our idols? Our security? Our worldly prestige?

That's what he wants from us. That is the commitment he seeks.

My prayer is that we can - in our hour of decision - say with St. Paul,

*We have been treated as imposters... and yet are true.
We have possessed nothing... and yet we have everything...
As dying... and behold, We live.*

Good Master, what must we have to inherit Eternal Life?

+++AMEN