



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

Scottish Charity No. SC006973

Reading Mark 10 : 17-31

Sermon: 11 October 2009

The text for the sermon

³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

How many times have you used this particular verse to justify your being late for an occasion or event?

I for one most certainly once did use it to cover up an embarrassing situation. It happened in my first charge in a small town called Cradock in the Eastern Cape. In those days it was expected from the minister to open all public events even political meetings with prayer and sit on the stage with all the important people.

I did not like party politics and I really resented the fact that I had to sit on a stage with all the people watching me. So Saturdays were usually the days of opening or constituting a public event in town. One Saturday I had to open a very important political party meeting where the leader himself was present. On that morning my alarm clock did not work due to a power failure during the night. So I was awakened by someone who nearly broke the window of my bedroom. It was the elder who realised that something was wrong – not knowing that I totally overslept! With much fear and anxiety I ran to the shower, got dressed and with the speed of a race motor got to the meeting. Of course everyone was waiting for me. They were already waiting 15 minutes! I was so embarrassed. So after I greeted all the important people on stage I walked to the podium and I could almost feel the irritation of the people. So I started by just quoting this Bible verse and everyone responded by laughing! Then I told them the full story and I was forgiven.

But I most certainly knew in the back of my head that this is not the meaning or the intention of the original text. Let us explore the context to understand what Jesus really meant.

In those days if you were wealthy you could afford your own teacher. In this case the rich man picks Jesus as his teacher. He even shows his great admiration for Jesus by falling on his knees. This must have been quite remarkable witness to everybody of what he thought of Jesus' abilities. Then he calls Jesus a good teacher and asks him how he can inherit the life of the world to come? Jesus then – without denying his own goodness – reminds him of the standard Jewish conception that only God can be good. Humans cannot be compared to God or his goodness. Jesus then remind him of the laws of Moses which deal with the things humans struggle with in comparison to God's Power and Almightyness. But again this man did not break one of these laws as most well educated Jews did not do in those days. Then Jesus asks him a real difficult question namely if he is willing to sell everything he owns and give it to the needy.

Jesus actually is turning the social order of his day upside down. In his society the prosperous were famous for their generosity while the poor were considered to be less generous! Jesus challenges him to put his faith into practise. Jesus almost reads his mind because He says that the kingdom of God is of much greater importance than all his wealth. It is a treasure that cannot be missed. But he could not commit because according to him, he had so much to loose

Then by means of a typical Jewish hyperbole Jesus exposes the problem of the rich man. He says that it is more difficult for a rich man to commit to the kingdom of God than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle - which is actually impossible! No wonder the disciples asks Jesus how on earth will humans then be saved?

Jesus reiterates his point – what is impossible for humankind, is possible for God. There is a big difference between humanity and God. Peter responds by saying that not all the people are the same. They abandoned their families and wealth to follow him. Jesus then says to them that they will indeed be part of God's eternal kingdom. Jesus also adds something else. The Jews believed that on the day of judgement everything will be turned upside down.

They applied it to their own position as a nation towards the other nations usually in a context of oppression. They firmly believed that although they are on the downside of events, one day they will prosper – literally “many who are first will be last, and the last first”. Jesus – however - applies it to the individual. God will be the judge of everyone's actions.

In this text several things are quite clear. Jesus did not renounce the Law of Moses. He was much more interested in the man's practical application of faith than his knowledge of the law. Jesus is actually saying anyone can try to obey all the laws. The real challenge is living out your faith in life itself with all its difficulties, stress and troubles. Jesus exposes the man's attitude towards the things that matter more than his wealth. But although the man did not respond to the challenge, Jesus acted in love and mercy. He was not rude to this man because of his lack of putting his faith in practise. The text says: “Jesus looked at him - meaning He took him serious and loved him”.

What is the meaning for us? I think Jesus is challenging us to put our faith into practise. He is actually asking you and me ONE question namely: How are we committed with our faith? Is our faith also only a matter of words and prestige and honour but lacks practical implication and application?

I think these questions are quite appropriate on a day like this when we as a church celebrate “harvest Sunday”. Harvest Sunday is about thanking God for his goodness. In the olden days the people thanked God by doing several things namely to bring their offerings or a tenth of all their income to the church or by handing out bare necessities to the poor. Nowadays we still bring our money and give it to charitable organisations through “gift aid”.

But is this enough? Can't we give more?

I really think it is not a question of money but one of attitude. It is actually about more than money. It is about our commitment to God and what we are willing to give to him. It is about everything we do, say, think and breathe – our time, our money, our priorities, our hope, our faith, our love, our mercy and forgiveness. Jesus gave us a perfect example of his love for us to follow. He gave us the keys to the kingdom of God through his suffering, death, and resurrection. You and I have the keys in our hands...

What do we do with it?

Do we hang it on a specific place on a key holder only to use it on Sundays to open the church of the soul? Do we tell others about this key and the treasure it can open or do we keep quiet about it?

Jesus commands us to commit ourselves one hundred percent to him and then to rise to the challenge of following him! The only God expects us to do is to include in him in everything we do, say and think, to live a life in gratitude of his mercy and love and to love him and our neighbours as we love ourselves!

I want to conclude by quoting a hymn that I think is quite appropriate:

“We ourselves are God’s own field,
fruit unto his praise to yield;
wheat and tares together sown,
unto joy or sorrow grown;
first the blade and then the ear,
then the full corn shall appear:
grant, O harvest Lord, that we
wholesome grain and pure may be.
For the Lord our God shall come,
and shall take his harvest home;
from his field shall purge away
all that doth offend, that day;
give his angels charge at last
in the fire the tares to cast,
but the fruitful ears to store
in his garner evermore.
Then, thou Church triumphant, come,
raise the song of harvest-home;
all be safely gathered in,
free from sorrow, free from sin”

Amen

Readings for the week.

Mark 10.17-31

The rich man of Mark 10:17ff is devout and interested in inheriting eternal life. He has kept the commandments since his youth. However, he is shocked when Jesus, looking at him and loving him, nonetheless asks him to sell what he owns to give to the poor, thus storing up treasure in heaven; so he goes away grieving. This is an interesting encounter for a number of reasons, only two of which can be explored here. First, it is important to note that Jesus in asking him to sell his possessions and give to the poor is not asking him to do something in addition to keeping the commandments: rather Jesus is asking him to keep the commandments through engaging in this radical action. Remember Jesus' declaration that to love God with all the heart and to love neighbour as oneself is to keep all the commandments. This is all that Jesus has asked him to do, as a means of confronting the limited extent to which he has been keeping the commandments thus far. Second, it is important to note the rich man's response: he goes away grieving. He is not angry, or appalled, or affronted, but saddened. He appears to recognise the validity of Jesus' radical demand but finds it impossible to follow because he is so attached to his possessions. This is surely a case of the word of God, as mentioned in Hebrews, being sharper than a two-edged sword in judging the heart. Going the way of the cross is costly.

Other readings: Job 23:1-9. 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16.

Prayer

Caring Father,

open my ears to your voice.

**Hold me when it seems as though you are not there
and help me both to share and to care.**

Amen

Next week's suggested readings.

Job 38: 1-7, 34-41

Psalm 104: 1-9, 24, 35c

Hebrews 5: 1-10

Mark 10: 35-45