

SERMON: 11 October 2015

Reading: Matthew 19: 16-30

BACKGROUND TO THE READING

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 a remarkable witness to all those standing around, 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 reminded him of the laws of Moses which deal with the things humans usually struggle with - such as murder, adultery, lies, deceit and unconditional love. The rich man almost immediately answered Jesus that he has obeyed all these laws. He did not break one of these laws, as most well-educated Jews would not have done 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 practice. 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 lose.

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 God and Man. 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. Those who are prosecuted will be saved. They applied it to their national and cultural identity. They firmly believed that although they are often persecuted and oppressed, 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 into practice. The text says: "Jesus looked at him", meaning "He took him seriously and loved him".

Amen

SERMON

What is the meaning for us? I think Jesus is challenging us today to put our faith into practice as well. He is actually asking you and me ONE question, namely: How are we committed to 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? Do we keep this key only for ourselves, for "our fellowship", for the "safe hands" because we do not want anyone to lose them, don't we?

Jesus commands us to commit ourselves one hundred percent to him and then to rise to the challenge of following him! The only thing 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!

But we need to remember it will not be easy to follow Jesus. We will have to face many trials, tribulations, and sacrifices. We will have to suffer discrimination, bullying and threats. We will struggle spiritually with ourselves, to get rid of all the things that separate us from serving God, being 100% committed like the rich man in our reading. We will have to face difficult “WHY” questions being asked by other people about our faith and God’s presence in tragedies.

No wonder Jesus said earlier in Matthew that although the Harvest is plentiful, the workers are few! Yes, as followers of Jesus we are in the minority. We are thin on the ground. But Jesus said to us what He expects us to do, namely to “Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

I think we have neglected this prayer in our following of Jesus. I think too often we want to fix the situation by canvassing, aggressively marketing people for the ministry. Yes, the Church of Scotland even appointed Ministers as “vocation champions” to ensure that people are targeted to consider the ministry. It is not our task to appoint, find or seek ministers or workers. No Jesus said to leave it to God. He will call.

May this day of Harvest thanksgiving help us to indeed not only thank God for the Harvest, but also ask him to call more workers for the Spiritual Harvest that is ready to be harvested!

Amen