

SERMON: 14 October 2018 – Rev Alistair Cowper

**“Is it alright to be rich in God’s Kingdom?”
(Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 and Mark 19:17-31)**

The short answer is yes but it’s not so easy.

It’s not riches as such that Jesus condemns, its the love of money, at the expense of love for God or justice for the poor or fair play for all.

According to the apostle Paul, writing to Timothy, the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. He had seen it cause people to wander from the truth and wreak havoc in a person’s life.

How generous we are is often an indication of how generous we perceive God to be. If we believe God to be kind hearted and like a generous father then we are likely to have a loose hold on money, so that when a need arises, we might be willing to part with it in order to benefit another. Whereas if our view of God, is of a distant being who has left us to get on with it and survive as best we can, then we’re more likely to hold money tightly and be less willing to part with it.

Being rich is no guarantee that people will be happy. The actor Jim Carrey famously said he wished everybody could get rich so that they could see that that wasn’t the answer.

Perhaps the rich man who ran to Jesus was looking for happiness. The fact that he ran might tell us he was desperate. Or maybe it tells us that he was procrastinating until the last minute, before his conscience finally got the better of him, and he made a last minute dash to see Jesus before he moved on to Jerusalem where his death lay ahead.

Whatever the reason, the rich man began the encounter running and ended it by walking away in sadness, his face to the ground, weighed down by the burden of his many possessions. Did he ever change we’re left to wonder? We’d like to think so. But Jesus is realistic. It’s hard for rich people to get into the kingdom of God.

It sounds like the rich man was at least trying to live a life that demanded some respect from others. According to William Barclay, this story about the rich man shows us clearly that respectability is not enough. Jesus had quoted the commandments which were the basis of the decent, respectable life. Without hesitation the rich man said he'd kept them all. But Barclay draws our attention to the fact that the commandments Jesus quoted were all negative with the exception of one, which operated only in the family circle - honour your mother and father. In effect the man was saying "I never in my life did anyone any harm". That was perfectly true, but as Barclay puts it, surely the real question was "what good have you done people? - what good have you done, with all your possessions, with all that you had to give away in order to comfort or help others?" As Barclay concludes, respectability, on the whole, consists in *not* doing things. Christianity consists in doing things, and doing things for others (253).

What opportunities might this rich man have missed, to see God's kingdom break in, if only he had the generous heart to desire it.

It's hard for rich people to get into the kingdom of God. When the disciples hear Jesus say this they appear to be astounded by this upside down politics. The disciples had grown up with the Jewish belief that people were rich because God had shown them great favour; that their faith had been rewarded; that they must have done the right things in order for God to have blessed them so. It's a belief that still exists in what some might call the prosperity gospel.

The disciples would have thought, well if this rich man, who has been blessed by God so much, if even he can't enter the kingdom of God, then who could? Who in the world could possibly be saved then?

Jesus' answer tells us that riches can't save us. Only God can save people. And in declaring that everything is possible with God, Jesus is opening the door to the kingdom wide. Yes it's like a camel passing through the eye of a needle but whilst that sounds impossible, it's God's bread and butter. It's the impossible that God delights in. He does what we can't. He even changes mean hearts and looses tight fists. He reorders people's priorities. He gives people the desire to seek first his kingdom and to put their resources at his disposal.

The church would be nowhere if it were not for generous hearts which have been touched by Divine love. The healed heart loves to give cheerfully. And so people tithe and give offerings week in week out; and some people leave legacies which allow the kingdom to grow even after their death. The church would be nowhere if it were not for generous hearts which have been touched by Divine love.

It's true, that growth in God's kingdom involves giving and giving up. Peter tries to convince Jesus that he and his friends had acted sacrificially since they began to follow him. We've given up everything to follow you, he said.

Jesus' answer is to acknowledge what his friends had done but to assure them of something more. He acknowledges that they will have faced persecution because they had chosen to follow Jesus. Some families would have turned their backs on family members that chose to follow Jesus. That still happens today in parts of our world, families can be ripped apart when a muslim becomes a follower of Jesus, for example. Jesus knows this happens and acknowledges it.

But he says there is more to be gained. It's not that he dismisses the loss, on the contrary, he points to faith in the God for whom nothing is impossible; and to the God, the only one who, according to Jesus, is truly good (notice that Jesus is so humble he refuses to take the title *Good Teacher*); but he is assuring those who follow him, that they are now gaining even more; even more brothers, sisters, parents, children, a new family, held together in this love of Christ, where property and possessions would be shared wherever there is need. True riches are to be discovered in this new kingdom which Christ announced.

Luke (in Acts 4) tells us that the early church shared everything. There was no one in the church community of believers who was left in need. No one considered things to be their own possession, in that the way we do now. Everything was held in common.

What would that look like if we were to practise this? Could we share our cars, our houses, our lawn mowers, our computers, our food, our money? Maybe we need a resource bank where we can make possessions available and where we can lend and borrow what we need and give what we save to a cause that God places in our hearts?

Lord, if this is of you, show us how.

Let me finish with this last thought. The rich man assures Jesus that he has not murdered or committed adultery or stolen or lied or cheated and he has honoured his mother and father.

And its as the rich man says these things, that Jesus has this genuine love for him, and looks at him, and tells him there is one thing that he lacks before he'll be able to follow Jesus. And that one thing was that he would need to loosen his tight hold on what he owned. Because holding these things tightly, would hold him back. He wouldn't discover love and true happiness until he put all he owned at the disposal of the poor, for the sake of Christ and the gospel's.

Even although the story leaves us with the rich man walking away in sadness, I'd like to think that the love of Jesus had begun something new in his life and that a change was coming. Jesus wanted the rich man to follow him. He wants everyone to follow him. He wants everyone to come face to face with his love and have their hearts warmed and to discover that loving God is the beginning of a healthy relationship with money, with possessions and with people.

May God continue to melt our hearts with his love and fill us, through and through, with his generous riches and Spirit of compassion, until his kingdom comes in all its glory, in KN and EC and in every place.