

Yours Lord: The Eye of the Needle

Luke 18:18-30 (& I Tim 6:3-10)

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Oh dear.

There are times when it seems like the Gospel – what we call the “Good News” – comes across as decidedly worrying news, even bad news. It was certainly the case for this rich ruler, whose face fell when told that he must give away all he had, for he was a wealthy man.

And there have been many attempts to soften these words of Jesus. It used to be said that the “Eye of the Needle” referred to a gateway into Jerusalem which was very low and narrow, and difficult to get a camel through. Lovely though this idea is, no such gateway has ever been found, and no other reference to it uncovered, so that theory is rather out of favour. Origen, in the 3rd century, suggested that, with a judicious but simple alteration to the word used for camel, it could be that Jesus’ original words referred to a ship’s rope instead.

But really there is little point in such softening. Jesus was not averse to using shock tactics to drive his point home, and besides there is the incredulous reaction of the crowd to account for. In any case, Jesus was not the first to allude to the eye of a needle before – another rabbi once spoke about an *elephant* going through the eye of a needle. Elephant, camel, what’s the difference when you’re trying to get them through the eye of a needle, I ask you.

Like it or not, we must take Jesus at his word: “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.”

To which the crowd reply: “Who then can be saved?”

One of the problems in any discussion about wealth is that it is all so relative. There are some in Windlesham who are undoubtedly richer than others; but if you own a house in Windlesham you are, *de facto*, a wealthy person in comparison to most other people of our nation. And to live in the UK is to be incomparably wealthy when compared to people in many other parts of our world – embarrassingly so, in fact. Wealth is a relative term.

Then there are the straight-up facts about life that living in Windlesham doesn’t necessarily mean you have lots of money floating around – for many people it is tied up in the property and in certain commitments, and the cost of living is higher. You could also argue that the value of property in the south east is really only money on paper which can only be released by moving away to a less expensive area.

So there are all sorts of questions about what we mean by wealth – like it or not it isn’t a straightforward subject.

So what are we to make of the bald statement: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man [or woman] to enter the Kingdom of God.”?

The key to unlocking this passage, for me, is the response of the ruler to the command from Jesus to sell everything he had and give it to the poor. “When he heard this, he became very sad,” writes Luke. It is as if the man in his searching has reached a hairpin bend in the road, that drives him away from his goal for good news, and leaves him facing bad news instead.

Consider, for a moment, where his search has begun. “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” It’s not a trick question, it’s a genuine one. “How do I get to heaven?” we might put it today – supposing we believed in heaven. And certainly as I take funerals month by month, it is that presumption of heaven that is in people’s minds as they talk about “Granny looking down on us,” or “At last Mum and Dad are together now.”

So here is this man asking Jesus what it is he must do to gain, inherit, his place with God. It’s not actually the kind of question a good Jew should ask, even in his day. A good Jew should ask the question: “What must I do to maintain the inheritance that God has already given me?” It’s a subtly different question that we’ll perhaps come back to.

Jesus’ reply is that he should keep the commandments – and he offers a selection of them. And the man’s response is that he has kept them all since he was a boy.

Was that arrogant of him? Well, in one sense no. It probably was, for him, a question of faith, keeping the Law as God had commanded. And after all, in the Law of Moses, if you got things wrong, there was a means of atoning for it provided by God – a way of setting things right with him again, through animal sacrifice. And if in the aftermath of the crucifixion we might say that the atonement provided by the law was a mere shadow of the true atonement found in Christ, this rich ruler would not, of course, have thought of it (or been able to think of it) that way.

So up until this point, we shouldn’t be reading arrogance or self-justification into his motives. Indeed, the very fact that he has come to ask Jesus “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” would suggest that he is well-aware of the dangers of being arrogant. He sees that in himself there is something more, something extra, something he lacks.

And that’s when he gets the bad news. That last little bit he is searching for is the one thing in his life he can’t do. And he’s never faced up to it for that very reason.

One should, of course, ask why it is that this request from Jesus was so difficult for the ruler – except that, deep inside ourselves we probably know the answer. To give up everything, just like that? Which of us, when challenged, would do that? And we are offered the contrast with the discipleship Jesus seeks – those who have left home, wife, brothers, parents, children for the sake of the kingdom of God. Which of us would be prepared to do that?

The rich ruler was going about his search for God the wrong way – bypassing the real problem in his life. He wanted to secure his place with God. And security, and the ability to sort things out, was important to him – not for nothing was he a ruler, and not for nothing was he a wealthy one. Wealthy rulers are accustomed to getting their own way. But the point about life with God is that it is not about security in this world, but letting go. God is the place of security, God is the one who holds us in his hands, even though in this world it makes us insecure. Faith is that capacity within us that lets go of our own security – to make our priority in life God’s Kingdom and not our own. And that is a hard thing to do, for any of us, rich or no. It is easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle.

And if we were to ask, which we ought, what does it mean to place our security in God's hands not our own, then we have a graphic object lesson in this encounter between Jesus and the rich ruler. Money and wealth and possessions are a powerful image of the degree of our trust in God. And they are powerful images because the way we use our wealth speaks volumes about our priorities – and this is true however much money we have

It's an instructive, albeit worrying, thing to do to ask ourselves the question of how we carve up our money. How much goes on our housing, our food, our clothing, our children, Sky TV, the home computer, the car, and luxuries (however we define them) of one form or another – and, of course, charitable donations? Consciously or otherwise, we create priorities in life, and our use of money in some way reflects those priorities. And that, I suspect, is why the subject of God and money is seen to be a vaguely distasteful one – because it challenges our priorities in a very personal way, it's just that little bit too close to the bone – a fact which the rich ruler discovered the hard way.

And our response can go one of two ways. If you read this story in Matthew and Mark, you will find that they both say, "he went away sad." It is as if in that moment he gave up on that line of enquiry – he couldn't stand there in front of Jesus, but turned his back on him in the hope of finding some other way. He couldn't face the truth.

But read the story in Luke (who, while champion of the poor and dispossessed, has a heart for the rich as well), and you will not find the man leaving. He became very sad, to be sure, but we are not told that he left. It is as if Luke wants to offer him a glimmer of hope – for only in his Gospel does the man get to hear the words: "What is impossible with men is possible for God."

Was the man able to respond to this chink of light – even if in only a small way? We are not told, and I think for very good reason. We are left not knowing in order that we may ask the question of ourselves. What would I do? What shall I do?

Faith begins when we take that first step to let God be our priority, our security, our dependency. It starts with recognising that eternal life is impossible without him. And it grows as we recognise that all things, our very existence, depends upon him. The more we learn that as our faith deepens and grows, the more it will shape (if we've learnt it) our priorities and the way we live our lives. In the end, the question (as we said before) is not, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" but, "What must I do now that eternal life has come to me in Christ?" And that is a question for every moment of every day as our faith in God deepens.

I cannot help but feel sorry for this rich ruler, who struggled so hard to come to terms with this demand upon him. Would that he could have been like Zacchaeus that Katrina spoke about last week, who on encountering Jesus gave away with joy half the wealth he had gained and repaid fourfold the wealth he had cheated from others. But do you see the difference? Zacchaeus encountered Jesus knowing he was nothing in spite of his wealth. This rich ruler didn't know that.

In the offertory prayer, which at the moment we don't use and perhaps we ought to, we are reminded of our nothingness before God. "All things come from you," we say. Nothing we possess is actually ours. And as we give to God, we say, "Of your own do we give you."

It is this kind of perspective that enables us to see the Gospel as good news.

In the autumn this year we are going to be invited to consider our giving to the Church, and I have to say that it is (or ought to be) a spiritual matter, because it asks us to consider our priorities and our responsibilities, and therefore our faith, and I hope that we will look at it in those terms.

So then, if this rich ruler is our object lesson, should we all sell everything we have and give to the poor? Logic would say otherwise, because if we did we would all become poor and then we would become the problem that giving to the poor had been designed to overcome in the first place. If you see what I mean. So, probably not, is the answer. In fact, the law of Moses commanded that one tenth of an Israelite's income, a tithe, should go to God, it being considered a good balance. Jesus, one supposes, was just making a point?

Does that make us feel relieved? If it does, then we've just discovered the power that possessions and wealth hold over us in place of God. You see, we think it buys us freedom, and instead it ensnares us, and makes us dependant upon it.

True relief comes when we discover that all things are possible with God, and he is where true security, and therefore true freedom lies. And I think for most of us it takes a lifetime and more to begin to learn that.

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