

THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE

Amos 5. 6-7, 10-15

Hebrews 4. 12-16

Mark 10. 17-31

I speak to you in the name of ✝ the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today we have St Mark's powerful story of our Lord and the rich man.¹ Significantly, this story comes immediately after another story, which tells us that Jesus took a child in his arms and said to his disciples, 'Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it' (Mk 10. 13-16). The Evangelist now illustrates what Christ means, by way of an adult contrast with the child.

There is something in the rich man's approach and exchange with our Lord that, for all its politeness on the surface, signals trouble deeper down. The man runs up and kneels before Jesus, but instead of saying, 'Have mercy', or 'Help me', says 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Christ notices. 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.' In other words, 'You falsely call me a Good Teacher, unless you believe that I and my teaching come from God.' What's more, the man has not asked how he may *receive* eternal life, but what he must do in order to *inherit* it. As the Gospel will show, the rich man has a confidence about himself and his life that will hinder him from following our Lord.

Jesus rehearses the man in the basics of the Law, especially the commandments about our relations with other people, to which the man replies, 'I have kept all these since my youth'. This is the crisis in the story. If the man had known himself thoroughly, he would have known how liable he was to judgement, as soon as he had heard the words, 'commandments' or 'Law'. But since plain words such as murder, adultery,

¹ St Matthew says that the man was young; St Luke writes that he was a ruler.

theft, false witness and fraud, do not arouse in him any sense of inadequacy; and since they do not convict him of envy, lust, covetousness or dishonesty, Christ now strikes him with a life-giving blow. As he does, our Lord looks on the man and loves him and says, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' At this the man's countenance fell, and he went away sadly, for he had many possessions.

The man's complacency is linked to his trust in his possessions, a sense of security which limits his awareness of his need of God and his self-knowledge as well. And now that the man has left, Jesus describes to his disciples how hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God, harder than getting a camel through the eye of a needle. In the Holy Land, the camel was the largest animal and the eye of the needle was the smallest opening; so the proverb is fitting. It is also true that 'the eye of the needle' was a small opening in the city wall through which a camel, unloaded of all burdens, would have to be dragged by ropes as it was forced down on its haunches. This softens the hyperbole of Christ's proverb, but the point is the same. We brought nothing into this world; and it is certain we can carry nothing out. So if we wish to enter God's kingdom, we have to lose our attachments to the riches of this world, to be willing to give them away, and then to follow our Lord.

The disciples are astonished: 'Then who can be saved?' This is something that is impossible for us to 'do', Jesus answers, in the sense that the rich man wished. But with God, all things, including getting a camel through the eye of a needle, moving mountains, and other wonders, are possible.

Peter, speaking for the other disciples, responds, 'Look, we have left everything to follow you.' Peter and his partners James and John had left behind their boats and nets and homes, to become 'fishers of men'. And in following him, Christ says that they will have new enterprises, adventures, friends and families, homes, yes, and

persecutions too, in this world; but certainly in the age to come, eternal life. They were already entering God's kingdom here and now, having let go of the kingdom of this world. They were, our Lord said, heavenward-bound.

Jesus's command to the rich man is not a universal call for all to leave their occupations and families and to enter monasteries (although this may be a particular call to some of us). Christ was testing the man at the point of his resistance to God, a resistance that had built up superficial ethics and religiosity. Neither are our Lord's words a critique of wealth *per se*, but a warning about the danger wealth (and indeed money) poses, not only to the hearts of the rich, but to all of us; and the implications of this danger for membership in the kingdom of God. Thus the rich man left Jesus and went his own way.

Christ calls us to be faithful stewards of the bounty God has given us. His call transforms our relationship to people, places, things and the events of life; and his call should transform our relationship to money.

I wonder if you have ever heard Henri Nouwen's story about a nun who had lived in Lima, Peru for quite some time and had the visit of a friend who was also a nun.

One afternoon, when this friend wanted to go shopping in the market, her experienced host said, 'Now, be careful on the buses and in the marketplace. Before you know it, they will grab your money, your handbag, and your watch. Be sure to take your watch off and put it in your handbag and hold your handbag tight under your arm.'

Thus warned, the sister went on her way. The bus was crowded as always, and she had to push her way into it, always conscious of the potential robbers around her. While the bus was moving, and while the sister was holding on to the handle to keep

her balance, she suddenly noticed her watch on the bare arm of a young man leaning against her.

Overcome by the fact that she had been robbed in spite of all the warnings that she had been given, and furious at the shameless thief, she screamed, 'You stole my watch, give it back immediately.' While saying this, she pulled out her pen and pushed it right into the man's cheek. The reaction was quick. The man, frightened by the aggressive nun, and realising (without understanding her English) that she meant business, quickly took off the watch and gave it to her.

Meanwhile, the bus had come to a stop and this gave the sister the opportunity to get off immediately. She had become so nervous that her only desire was to get home. When she returned to her friend's house with her watch still tightly grasped in her hand, her friend said: 'But how, in heaven's name, did this man ever get into your handbag?' 'I don't know', was the puzzled answer. Then the sister opened her handbag and found her watch tucked safely between her notebooks and papers. In total consternation, she cried out, 'My God, now I have two watches, and one of them I stole!' Her excessive vigilance had turned her into a robber.

As Henri Nouwen commented, 'Maybe on her next trip to the market, the sister should wear a watch on each arm, so that at least one will be stolen.'

You and I are to be generous. In so doing, we will see that we have 'cast our bread upon the waters', and that it will return to us in many other forms. Love multiplies and grows as it is exercised. The more of it we give, the more of it we have. Love is stronger than death. Jesus Christ is the proof. All things are possible with God. If he wants to, the rich man *can* go through the eye of the needle and join the little child in the kingdom. Amen.