

Twenty-eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time

13 October 2024

Message – Follow me, giving time, talents, and treasures

Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of Life, may we share the your gifts with all the world. **Amen.**

‘Follow me!’ Who do you follow? Today we talk of following people on social media. This is not the kind of following to which Jesus is referring.

We follow the news, public figures, particular organisations, because we find them interesting or informative or sometimes a bit of a joke. We follow them with some degree of critical thinking. And, if they do not live up to what we expect, we usually reject them.

When Christ says, ‘Follow me!’ we know where the story is heading. Christ lived out the life, captured in the gospels, that led to condemnation, death, and finally to resurrection. To follow this path is not just to click like and think no further. This kind of following demands our all and transforms every part of our life.

Jesus says, ‘Follow me!’ to condemnation, death and finally resurrection. There are rewards along the way but there is also a price. No longer trusting in the riches of the world, is a part of that price. It is joked that the last part of a person to be converted is their wallet. It seems that this was as much the case in Jesus’s day as it is today.

The rich man who comes to Jesus, with added information from Matthew and Luke often referred to as the rich young

ruler, has done all that is required of him in the law. Yet, in his heart he knows more is needed and so he asks the Rabbi Jesus what he must do.

The rich man is thinking in the wrong terms. He thinks there is something more that he can do. At some level, he is right but the right action is about a change of heart. It is about placing God at the centre of his life and letting go of everything else in the service of God and of God's children.

There is nothing we can do to earn our salvation, inherit the eternal life, enter the Kingdom of God. As Jesus points out to the rich man, no human can be called good. No matter how hard we try, we fall short of God's love for the world, we fall short of God's generosity and compassion.

At present, we are following the lectionary of continuous readings, so when we find connection between the Hebrew Scripture reading and the Gospel this is not by design but a happy chance. Today's readings provide an obvious tension.

Job is the example of a righteous man and his wealth is seen as a blessing from God for that righteousness. This would seem to be at odds with Jesus' Teaching. How can Jesus say that Job is as likely to be righteous as a camel is to pass through the eye of a needle?

And, today, we are as certain as we can be that Jesus really was referring to the largest animal passing through the smallest hole imaginable, and neither a rope passing through a needle, as some later manuscripts have, nor a camel passing through a gateway, an interpretation not found in the first millennium after Christ's resurrection is intended.

We know that there is no way that a camel can pass

through the eye of a needle. This is why the disciples are so shocked. They know Job to be righteous; the prophet Ezekiel names Job along with Noah and Daniel as people so righteous they could redeem a city (Ezek, 14.14, 20, c.f. Gen 18.21-33). Jesus is challenging this. He demands new thinking. Hebrew thought was changing. Within the apocrypha in Sirach (31:5-7), we have:

- ⁵ One who loves gold will not be justified;
one who pursues money will be led astray by it.*
- ⁶ Many have come to ruin because of gold,
and their destruction has met them face to face.*
- ⁷ It is a stumbling-block to those who are avid for it,
and every fool will be taken captive by it. [NRSVA]*

Jesus goes beyond this, even the wisdom that implicitly might save us in this passage is not sufficient.

The overarching narrative of the book of Job itself also undermines the notion that wealth is a sign of God's blessing. The book of Job examines why life is not fair. Two chapters before today's reading, Job points to the happiness of the wicked, the lack of calamity which befalls them, and the way in which tyrants are glorified. Yes, there are examples of loving and generous rich people but Job points out there are plenty of examples of wealthy people who are not rich in their love of God or of others.

So, while the Book of Job is using the wealth of Job as a sign of God's blessing, it is simultaneously pointing to the flaw in the belief that the two are correlated. We cannot say because someone is wealthy God is blessing their actions.

One might then wonder, what it is about the life of Job that

makes him righteous. The persistent theme is Job's absolute faith in God. As he said in last week's reading '*Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?*' (Job 2.10b) Even in his darkest moments:

⁸ *'If I go forward, he is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive him;
⁹ on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.*

a counter point to Psalm 139; we cannot escape from God but we may not be able to find God. Yet, even in this moment Job still believes in God and that God is our loving creator. Even in God's apparent absence, Job continues to trust in God.

Just as Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:3, Galations 3.6), so too, it appears, Job is counted as righteous. Among the competing voices of the Hebrew Scriptures, faith is a firm necessity if we are to be righteous before God.

In the case of Abraham, his actions show his faith. In the case of Job his indomitable faith in God, even in the face of calamity and all the accusations of his three friends.

It is by faith in the grace of God that we are saved. Yet, the uncomfortable demand, as Christ says, 'Follow me!' is that we are must be ready to give up everything, to sell, or give away all that we have to follow Christ.

Jesus looks kindly on both the rich man and the disciples both long to be a part of the kingdom of God. The rich man falls, or at least stalls, at an early hurdle. He is not ready for his wallet to be converted to God's service.

The disciples too have not got all the way there. They have given up everything but at this point they are expecting a reward in this life, just as they are thinking that the rich are being rewarded.

Jesus looks with kindness on us all as we come to realise that wealth is not Gods way. God calls us to sacrificial living and through such living we will be wealthy in relations, in being at home, in our essential needs being met, all through being a part of the body of Christ, and with that will come persecutions too, along with all the normal suffering of life, which will be eased by being a part of the family of God.

If we face up to the words of Jesus with honesty, whether we are rich in time, talents, or treasures, many of us may initially be shocked and feel a sense of grief. That is natural with any kind of loss. Yet, it is also an invitation to gain. We gain because we become a part of the body of Christ that shares one another's burdens.

So, I invite you to consider your giving to the life of the body of Christ, whether that is to the cathedral, to another church, or to other Christian organisations. The only way in which our cathedral and our wider church can survive is through the generosity of people sharing their gifts, whether those are time, talents, or treasures.

Though we are doing better than many of the churches of traditional denominations, in real terms, our income is showing a slow decline. I don't believe that that reflects the passion of the people here. So, I encourage you this week to reflect on your giving, can you give more of your time, talent and treasures, and respond wholeheartedly to Christs

call to 'Follow me!'