

## Mark 10: 17-31 – Jesus and Priorities

### Prayer

Things that Vicars often hear people say – at least in my experience – check them out if you like –

- *He never did anyone any harm* – usually in connection with funeral visits, that one.
- *I'll have to give my apologies for that.*
- *I don't think we'll be able to pay the Parish Share this year* – at PCCs and accompanied by intake of breath
- *I don't know what things are coming to these days; they really ought to do something about that.*

Hold those for the moment. Fellow comes up to Jesus – *what must I do to inherit eternal life?*

Interesting question; loads of assumptions there, but we'll let them pass for the moment. Jesus responds – *you know the commandments*, and with wide-eyed innocence the man tells Jesus that he has kept them all from his youth. In those days people did believe you could keep the entire law. And thinking about it – how many of you have committed murder? You shall not steal, commit adultery etc – perhaps we won't ask for hands up. If we look at the commandments as a series of rules or tick-boxes, my guess is that most of us here would not score too badly. *He never did anyone any harm*. He was decent, respectable, like us... self-aware?

Well, Jesus shocked him to his core – *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 point it's quite common to jump in and remind us that Jesus only ever said this to one person in the Gospels and it applied to him and only him and not to us, please, certainly not to me, where's the get-out clause? This man had many possessions; he was rich. Are you rich? Am I rich? Comfortable, yes. Do I like my home and what's in it? Well, yes. What if Jesus asked me to sell it all and give the money to the poor? If I'm honest, I'd struggle. I'd wriggle and bargain. Fifteen hundred years ago Augustine observed that merely by having wealth, one tends to love it inordinately.

It's a question of priorities. When I hear people give their apologies, what I hear is that they are telling me their priorities. This meeting is more important than that one. I need to spend time with my family rather than going out to another church meeting. We have to make our apologies because we don't have the time or energy for everything. We have to make priorities – and those are very personal choices. What priorities? Where does Jesus fit in? It seems to me that one of the things in our story this morning is that the rich man is willing to include Jesus in his list of priorities – after all he calls him *Good Teacher*, and there's no reason to think this is just flattery or politeness. He had a high opinion of Jesus and really wanted to know what he thought. Could Jesus help him with his priorities? I don't think Jesus ought to be one of our priorities – as if he is in competition with the daily tasks of life, having a comfortable home, and so on. Rather Jesus is the overall framework in which we need to think about all our priorities. Does our home glorify Jesus? Does my lifestyle and do my life choices honour Jesus? Does my conversation honour Jesus? Not in the sense that I'm always going on about him, but if I'm gossiping or passing on slander then that's not honouring him.

And what do I want to pass on to my children? Here are some more words of wisdom from Augustine, 1500 years ago: *There is no compelling necessity for you to store up large earthly treasures for your children. You would do better to make your offspring treasures of God than make*

*them richer in worldly goods.* There's a priority that is definitely counter-cultural – to give our children and grandchildren spiritual riches more than material wealth.

On the subject of which, *oh it'll be a struggle to pay our parish share this year.* That's priorities too. There's plenty of money in every church; the trouble is that most of it is in our personal accounts and because it's staying there, too many churches think they are in financial difficulties. In many cases, *can't afford it* means *don't want to make it a priority.* I won't tell you which parish it was but there were two older chaps talking and bemoaning the state of the church and the age profile which was rather Classic FM. So I told them about our plans for a youth worker and how I needed to raise another £250 a month. I asked them straight if they could help. Neither was poor and neither did. I quoted Augustine on how being wealth means that we tend to love it inordinately. His next sentence was *Hence the rich find faith exceptionally hard.* Tricky that. We tend to think about faith as what we believe and where we put our trust. But if we listen to Jesus about being a disciple, and hear the echo of James – we were looking at his book recently – faith without works is dead. Lots of Augustine today – here's a prayer he wrote *Teach us Lord this difficult lesson – to manage conscientiously the goods we possess and not covetously desire more than you give to us.* Amen?

Now when Jesus' disciples heard all this they were *perplexed* – that was putting it mildly I suspect. At that time people believed that wealth was a sign of God's blessing. Prosperous = successful in the eyes of all of us and blessed by God. Being rich was a sign of God's blessing. We hear echoes of this in the so-called prosperity gospel – if you want to know more go to some of the more obscure channels on your TV and hear what some unscrupulous preachers say about giving to their ministries... But Jesus preferred to tell a joke – have you heard the one about the camel and the eye of a needle? Impossible, of course, but that's the whole point of the joke and see what happens when we try and explain. Impossible, yes, but not for God. *Oh Lord, we can't possibly live up to this!* Peter jumps in – he often did, *Look we have left everything and followed you!* None of this *they ought to do something.* Peter and the others were right there with Jesus. And Jesus recognised that and affirmed them – *yes, and you will get into all kinds of trouble for it but you will have eternal life.* And then Jesus typically comments, *many who are first will be last and the last will be first.* You are right Peter, you are doing well, but don't get complacent about it and think that you're better, more in God's favour than everyone else.

Jesus does not give an easy ride to anyone who wants to follow him and be a disciple. Especially if we are thinking about how we might fit Jesus into our long list of priorities. Or if we have the same question in our minds – *Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* Can we **do** anything to deserve eternal life? When Jesus summons us to follow him and leave everything behind it is tempting to think he's asking too much. But then two thoughts. The first is that only one who has given everything has the right to demand everything from us. Jesus – broken on the cross, remembered today in the bread broken for us – gave all for me and for you. And then secondly Jesus promises eternal life as a gift, and CT Studd, England cricketer who became a missionary in central Africa once remarked that a person is no fool to give up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. Priorities...