

The rich young man
Mark 10: 17-31
St. Paul's, Milford
11 October 2015: 8:00 and 9:30

There are really three separate stories in today's Gospel reading, but they all follow the same general theme. There are some familiar sayings among them for the truths conveyed are among the most exquisite in the Scriptures.

The first will be last and the last will be first.
It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.
For God all things are possible.

The passage really gets to the very heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus and what it means to have to make choices.

This teaching hit home too. When Jesus told the disciples that the way wouldn't be easy, Peter was a bit indignant. Look, he said to Jesus, we've left everything and followed you. What more do we have to do? Haven't we done enough?

Today I really want to focus on 'the man' who came to Jesus. I describe him that way because that's how Mark describes him, 'a man'. However, if we look at the parallel passage in Matthew, we find he's described as 'a young man'. When we turn to Luke he's referred to as 'a certain ruler'. If we bring all these together we end up referring to him as 'the rich, young ruler'.

Let's note a couple of things:

Clearly, he was a person of quality; he lived a good life. And he came running to Christ, an indication of his humility. He flung himself at Jesus' feet. Quite amazing really: this rich, young aristocrat falling at the feet of the penniless prophet from Nazareth.

He addresses Jesus as 'Good Teacher'. But Jesus gets him to ease up on that one as if to say 'Flattery will get you nowhere'. Why do you call me good? – only God is good, God alone. Jesus is really saying, let's look at this calmly, let's put emotion aside. I don't want you to be swept away by your feelings.

There's always a danger that the pupil, the scholar, the young person can form a personal attachment to the teacher and think that it's an attachment to God.

The teacher must never point to himself but away from himself to point to God.

He came to him when Jesus was on his way – ‘as Jesus was setting out on a journey’. The young man came to Jesus when others were around. He didn’t insist upon a private conference with him by night, as Nicodemus did. It was all out in the open.

He knelt before Jesus, in token of the great value and reverence he had for him. He recognised him as a teacher come from God and his earnest desire was to be taught by him.

The gospels attempt in various ways to explain what sort of man he was and how he felt at the end of the conversation. But let’s look at what was said in the conversation. It begins with a question. Again slightly different wording:

Mark	What must I do to inherit eternal life?
Luke	What must I do to have eternal life?
Matthew	What good deed must I do to have eternal life?

In each case Jesus reinforces the teaching of the Ten Commandments or at least the six that deal with love of neighbour. And in each the man’s response is basically that: ‘Teacher, I’ve kept all these since my youth’. In each there’s the conclusion that the young man still lacks something. In Matthew, it’s the young man who asks, ‘What do I still lack?’ In Luke and Mark, Jesus states the obvious: ‘You lack one thing’. It doesn’t matter much: the conclusion is obvious. Jesus is really saying: Look, it’s not enough to be respectable. Stop thinking of goodness as a matter of **not** doing certain things.

But the advice given to this particular young man is the same: If **you** want to inherit eternal life, you should go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor and then you will have treasure in heaven. In this particular case Jesus gave this advice. It was his wealth that was getting in the way. I say ‘to this particular young man’, because it’s possible he would have given different advice to another.

The way in which the young man responds varies too. Let’s jump to the end of the passage.

Note that in Mark, 'He was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions'.

In Luke, 'He became sad, for he was very rich'.

In Matthew, 'He went away grieving, for he had many possessions.'

Was he shocked then, or was he sad or was he grieving? Each in its own way attempts to describe his feelings.

We've skipped over one important point. Jesus had a great deal of respect for this young man. Note in particular the verse: 'Jesus, looking at him, loved him', before saying to him that he needed to sell up.

Three points about that part of their encounter: Jesus, looking at him, loved him.

First, Jesus wasn't angry with him. He liked the young man; he admired him. It wasn't an angry look. It was a look based on his love and respect for him.

Second, it was a look that wanted to pull the man out of his comfortable, respectable, settled life into the adventure of being a real disciple.

Third, it was the look of grief. The sorest grief, that of seeing a man deliberately choosing to fail to be what he might have been and what he had in him to be.

In the same way, maybe, Jesus looks at us with the sorrow of one who looks at a loved one who refuses to be what he might have been or could have been.

In a very mild way I remember choosing to seek ordination rather than continue a career in accountancy and in the public service. I suspect that your Vicar-elect had to make the same sort of choice.

But that pales into insignificance compared with: The doctor who opted to remain in a low decile community rather than move to an affluent city practice. People like Dr Lance O'Sullivan. Or another doctor I met years ago who chose to work in remote Tuatapere, where he stayed 30-40 years, rather than advance his career in the city and work in the medical school.

The teacher who chose to move from a wealthy well-resourced school to work in a low decile ethnic community.

The priest who gave up his successful parish in Australia to serve the church in Papua New Guinea.

Or another who gave up a city parish to take on a rural parish that had gone through difficult times and was at risk of closing.

The nurse who volunteered to work for the Red Cross in one of the world's hot spots.