

Address for 10 October by Bill Pattinson

One of the many wonderful memories I have of our pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 2008 was a camel ride. I wrote in my diary:

“Nigel and I had a camel ride, Nigel in front myself behind. I was given a keffiyeh, the Arabian head ware, to present that real Lawrence of Arabia look. What fun! A camel ride, quite scary, you’re so high up and this on the Mount of Olives, the Kidron valley below and Jerusalem beyond.”

I recall this memory because, even as a small boy, I was and still am fascinated by Jesus’ saying, which we heard in this morning’s gospel, that, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.” As a boy I thought, “Well it’s impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle because even if you got the head and neck through, there’s that big hump to overcome, and, of course, if it’s a Bactrian camel, there are two humps.”

There have been various attempts to soften the demands of this statement, which the disciples found perplexing and which for many of us today is both disturbing and shocking. A huge majority of people in the UK are in the richest 1% in the world. The first thought is that the Aramaic word for a camel, kamelon, is very similar to that of rope, kamilon. Perhaps an error in translation then. A more imaginative thought is that there is a gate in some city walls, called the “eye of the needle”, where camels would be released from the burdens they were carrying, and if they bent their knees, might just manage to get through. A third thought refers us to the version of this story in the King James Bible, where Jesus says, “Children, how hard it is for them that trust in riches to enter the Kingdom of God.” So what exactly is Jesus saying in this morning’s Gospel Reading about wealth in the context of our faith and in our hope of eternal life?

Prior to the rich man approaching Jesus with his question, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”, Jesus had just blessed the little children with the words, “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” Here we have a man, who Mark says has “many possessions”, who Matthew calls young and who Luke calls a ruler, indeed a rich, young ruler - think of someone like today’s Chancellor of the Exchequer. This is in complete contrast to a little child. He genuinely shows respect to Jesus and asks his question with no guile, unlike the Pharisees before him. It is ironic that he asks about eternal life to Jesus who is just

beginning his journey to Jerusalem and to his death. His shock and grieving that Jesus tells him to “sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven; then come, follow me”, reveals a great weakness in the man. It is not that he is rich, it is that he loves money, wealth, riches much more than he loves God. Jesus is saying, “Don’t make money an idol. Love and give. Remember the poor. Put God first.”

Now if we are honest with ourselves, all these aspects of what it means to follow Jesus rankle our deeply grained instincts towards security and self-preservation. Love of money is a great temptation. We enjoy having it and spending it. I’ve just bought myself a new car which I’m picking up on Thursday - can’t wait! I remember seeing “Cabaret” at the Donmar Warehouse when the then young Alan Cummings, playing EmCee, hypnotically sang:

“Money makes the world go around, the world go around, the world go around.
Money makes the world go around, it makes the world go round...”

Jesus was asking this particular rich man to sacrifice all his material possessions to meet his particular spiritual needs. Something was missing in his life. But as much as he wanted to go to Heaven, it appears his wealth was more important to him. No wonder the disciples were perplexed. Jesus hadn’t asked Simon and Andrew to give up their house in Capernaum; nor Mary and Martha to sell theirs. There’s no record of Jesus asking his fishermen disciples to sell their boats. The rich young ruler, whom Jesus loved, was seduced by the wealth he had, trusting in his possessions rather than God. God’s Grace is the only way to eternal life, based on how much we have loved God and others.

We are all given different gifts by God so that we may flourish and live our lives to the full. What we do with our gifts is vital. The Psalm appointed for today is Psalm 90. Verse 12 of this psalm reads:

“So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.”

One day we will die, for sure, but we are not dead yet, so there’s a lot of life to be lived. However no amount of wealth, pleasure, celebrity or any other goods of this world removes the sure reality of death. “For we brought nothing into this world and it is certain we can carry nothing out.”

We must indeed engage with life fully in order to inherit eternal life. How do we do that? By loving. By sharing life here and now with others in love and by putting the

love of God in our lives first. We can be assured of the greatness of God's loving. All are welcome in his Kingdom, rich and poor. So what do we do with the days that are left? We keep loving and giving. As the final verse of our reading from Hebrews, which Emma read this morning says:

“Let us therefore approach the throne of Grace with boldness so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”