

Sermon Notes, Sunday 14 October 2018

Alstonville Anglicans

New Life

Henri Nouwen's words about the rich young man in today's Gospel provide some thoughts for reflection here:

"He couldn't let go of his concerns, and thus, disappointed and downcast, he left Jesus ... I feel sad because I wonder how different his life would have been had he been free enough to follow Jesus. He came, heard, but then left. We never hear of him again. This man, whom Jesus also loved in a special way and also invited to become a witness to the good news, remains unknown. He never became a follower of Jesus and never made his mark on the history of the church as these other disciples did. I feel like praying tonight that my life might become simple enough for me to be able to say 'yes' when Jesus looks at me with love and invites me to leave everything behind and follow him." ²

Dr Murray Harvey



Image: Detail from "Jesus and the Rich Young Man" (1889) by Heinrich Hoffman (1824-1911) Riverside Church, New York.

Notes

1. Dante Alighieri's, *Divine Comedy* completed in 1320 inspired Charles Williams' *The Figure of Beatrice*, 1943
2. Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak*, p.16

The encounter between Jesus and the **rich young man** and Jesus' illustration of the **camel and the needle's eye** capture our attention today as we listen to Mark's Gospel (10:17-31). The **context** of this passage is important. In this central part of the gospel of Mark there are three blocks of teaching about **discipleship** during Jesus' journey towards Jerusalem: 8:31-9:29; 9:30-10:31 and 10:32-45. Today's reading is part of the middle block. It is therefore in the light of *discipleship* that the encounter with the young man has to be understood. The man is concerned with eternal life (hence his question at v.17 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?') but Jesus is teaching (and Mark is reporting on) the characteristics and cost of being a disciple.

Much has been written about this encounter:

- **Julian Boulnois**, prominent Queensland psychiatrist and Christian writer once wrote that the young man was "heavily over-invested emotionally in the pursuit of maintaining and servicing his material possessions and until he changed his priorities there was no room left for discipleship" [p.93 *And the walls Came Tumbling Down*, 1983]

- Priest and Spiritual writer **Henri Nouwen** wrote “ ... the young man’s life was too complex ... he had too many things to worry about, too many affairs to take care of, he couldn’t let go of his concerns ... I feel sad because I wonder how different his life might have been had he been free to follow Jesus” [p.16 *The Road to Daybreak*, 1994]
- **John Painter**, formerly of St Mark’s College, Canberra, wrote that the man’s possessions functioned as an end in themselves. Despite his searching question, he couldn’t conceive of a future without these material things: “His possessions came first, exposing a conflict between the existential ultimate and the ontological ultimate” [p.15 *St Mark’s Review*, no. 173 Autumn 1998].

The rich man is too attached to his many possessions to leave everything and become a disciple. In the terms of his own original question, his attachments also prevent him from letting go of what has gone before and taking on the new life of faith necessary for eternal life. This question is explored in Charles Williams’ study of Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* ¹ Here, the **way of rejection**, or the negative way, is contrasted with the **way of affirmation**. The former is a renunciation of all worldly goods and affections. Followers of this way detach themselves from the world. Since, in this understanding, God is not visible in outward things, any contemplation of, or connection to, the ‘material’ prevents us from knowing him.

The way of affirmation, on the other hand, seeks to recognise God in and through the activities and experiences of everyday life. In a life full of attachments (relationships, possessions, commitments) the follower of the affirmative way seeks to recognise and glorify God in and through the material world.

Through the centuries the church has held up the way of rejection as the highest way. It is often associated with some religious orders and holy orders. However, most Christian disciples live life in a world full of attachments. Hence we experience the affirmative way. The challenge is then - how do we live life surrounded by possessions and concerns without becoming overly attached to them, to the extent that it would prevent us from letting go, such as in today’s Gospel?

Despite our often crippling attachments we hanker for a simplified life. Maybe we long for the way of rejection of worldly goods, a simpler way, so we can focus fully on God? In relation to this, John Pridmore (Ridley Hall, Cambridge) states that most of us are like Martha, but we feel guilty about this and we long to be like Mary instead! Charles Williams in his book *The Figure of Beatrice* says we are torn between the two ways. There is a “tangle of affirmation and rejection which is in each of us”. Martin Luther’s concept *Simul Justus et peccator* is similar—we are both *already* and *not yet*.

Most scholars agree that Jesus’ reply to the rich man in Mark 10 is tailored specifically to the man himself. After all, he asks Jesus, “What must I do ...?” and Jesus “*looked at him and loved him*” and said “You lack one thing, go and sell what you own ...” Because Jesus could see into his heart, the call came to this man specifically as one that involved the giving up of his possessions in order to become a disciple. This is what he needed to do. Hoffman in his painting “Jesus and the Rich Young Man” has captured a look of acknowledgement of this truth on the young man’s face. You and I might have just as many possessions, or likely even more, but the call to you and me will differ depending on our own needs and shortcomings.

There are at least two key themes in this passage today: the requirements for **eternal life** (the man’s question) and the requirements for **discipleship** (Jesus’ main focus in this section). The Christian faith is not just about the promise of a life to come. After all, this is a free gift by grace alone (Eph 2:8). It is also about the **promise of a new life here and now**. What do you and I need to do in order to accept that new life here and now and live it more effectively? The rich man was asking about the *ultimate reward* of eternal life. *But Jesus was offering new life here and now!* Yes, eternal life is a free gift, but a gift can be accepted or rejected, and if new life is to be accepted the old has to be cast off first. Anything that hinders discipleship holds back that new life that is in us.

The illustration that Jesus uses in verse 25 is a poignant one for us as members of a materialistic, consumer society: “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” [Note that as members of a western society we all can be considered rich in relative terms].

In response, maybe we can ask ourselves:

- What material things, worries and concerns hinder my life of discipleship?
- How can I live a more simple life?
- Do I own my possessions or do they own me?

There are many **resources** that can help us discern a more simple life, with practical suggestions on how to implement it. Not surprisingly, one is from an offshoot of the Amish Community in the USA!

<http://www.wandabrunstetter.com/amish-life/simple-living-tips/>

Another is helpful too: <http://www.thenonconformingprofessional.com/simple-living-ideas.html>

In response to today’s Gospel let’s be careful not to let any of the things that surround us stifle the new life that is in us. May we glorify God in and through our worldly context.