A Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

The Gospel passage begins with Jesus spending time with the crowds who would gather around him as he travelled and taught from town to town. His influence is spreading, to the point where people bring their children to him. He is blessing them, which is an expression of God's love for all people, from newborn infants to the elderly, but then there is a disruption to this moment of hospitality and amiability. The disciples prevent people bringing their children to Jesus, "sternly ordering them not to do it". They are policing access to Jesus, but Jesus challenges this. He calls for the children, giving them and their families permission to approach, and says "do not stop them". Nobody is to be prevented from spending time with Jesus, or from learning from him. As saviour of humanity, he has come for the sake of all people – not just a limited group of elect.

He values the little ones for their faith, saying "it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs". And then he explains, "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it".

Here is a moment where we need some clarification. Jesus does not want us to have a simplistic faith, but to believe in God with the purity of heart that we see in children. They often believe so deeply, and with certainty, and it is this depth that Jesus calls us to share. So let us believe in the Kingdom of God with all that we are, and when we approach God, do so with certainty in God's love, grace and mercy.

Jesus then goes on to tell a parable that explains how the cares of the world can separate us from God and distract us from the things on which we should focus; the parable of the rich ruler. It begins with the ruler confirming their understanding of the commandments and their importance. He says to Jesus, "I have kept all these since my youth". If you break this down as a check of the rich ruler's knowledge and its practical application, he has passed his theory exam with flying colours. He knows what he needs to do, and now it is time to assess whether he can also put it into action.

Jesus then challenges the young ruler, saying that "there is still one thing lacking". He tells him to "sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me".

This may sound like a call to poverty and simplicity of life, having no more than is strictly necessary and ensuring that any and all additional funds are given to the poor. But no, Jesus has gone deeper in this encounter. He has determined what it is that

prevents this person from flourishing and prevents them from being deeply and fully connected to God and God's wisdom. In this specific case, it is earthly wealth.

This is a parable that challenges us to think about what distracts us from what really matters, and from living out our faith to the full. It is a call to reflect, to make decisions, and then to act so that we might be able to lay aside what distracts us and to embrace Jesus' teaching and the wisdom that underpins them.

In order to remain hopeful, we should not discount Jesus final words to the rich ruler: "then come, follow me". As usual, Jesus ends his challenge with an invitation that the rich ruler is welcome among the disciples, and has a place among Jesus' followers. Jesus is willing and ready to embrace the rich ruler as one of his flock, and cares for him deeply, as he cares for all people.

The rich ruler becomes sad when challenged. Jesus then sympathises, acknowledging how difficult the task can be. "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

People in the crowd then ask, probably feeling concerned, "then who can be saved?" But Jesus reassures them, saying "what is impossible for mortals is possible for God". Jesus makes sure that the people understand that through God's grace and with God's wisdom, they can put aside those things which distract them and which can limit their faith, and be encouraged and supported in their attempt.

As a more direct example of encouragement, look to Jesus words to Peter. Peter notes just how much they have given up in order to follow Jesus and respond to their calling, and Jesus acknowledges their effort. Jesus says that there is nobody who has made efforts to "who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life".

Jesus' words are still encouraging for us. If we persevere in living out our faith we will live in such a way that we will flourish, and we will achieve something precious and blessed – a life that allows us to, in the words of the second letter to Timothy, to 'fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith'. May we all be able to say those famous words when we look back upon our life, and when we enter into God's kingdom and approach the throne.

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