

Readings: Job 23.1-9,16-17; Psalm 22; Hebrews 4.12-16; Mark 10.17-31

“Even after everything that you’ve said, and venting as much as I have, I’m just as upset as I was when we started! I wish I knew where I could find G-d so that I could confront Him! I would lay out my case before Him and, even if He prevented me from speaking, I’d love to know what He has to say! Even if He afflicts me, He will not intimidate me into shutting up because I am innocent and I intend to prove it. But I look East, West, North and South and I cannot find Him.”

“G-d knows I am innocent, which is why He won’t meet with me. I have kept all of His will, treasuring His word more than I do my own daily bread. G-d is the ruler of all, no one will speak up before Him, and whatever He desires is what occurs. He will keep punishing me until He’s finished, just as all His plans for mankind see their fruition. So when I think about His ways, yes, I get scared. What He’s done to me has certainly ‘put the fear of G-d’ into me! I must say, I’m amazed that He’s done all this and it hasn’t killed me yet!”

This is a paraphrase from Rabbi Jack Abramowitz from the section of Job we read this morning. In the story of Job, Job’s accusers, in this case Elifaz the Temanite along with his other accusers, try to work out whether Job had done something to deserve his awful suffering. Elifaz accuses Job of some fairly severe sins, but Job here continues to protest his innocence.

Let’s put Job and the rich man in this morning’s Gospel into parallel.

Job has four main attributes which characterise his piety. The first is that he is blameless – his character is without essential defect, Job is a man of integrity. The second is that Job “upright” – he is not twisted or perverted but conformed to God’s spiritual and moral standards. The third attribute is “a man who fears God” – a biblical designation for a godly, religious person. The fourth attribute is “a man who turns away from evil.” He stayed away from all that was wrong in thought, speech, and behavior. In addition to these four attributes, Job participated in religious services, offering sacrifices on behalf of his children. Finally, Job’s godliness was not a moderate or nominal piety. Even God testified that Job was the godliest man of his generation.

The same could be said of the man who ran up and knelt before Jesus and asked him the question, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered, using those parts of Ten Commandments that deal with social responsibility – “You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You

shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.” The man had kept these basic tenets since his youth – all his life. But yet, like Job, he had questions of God that remained unfathomable.

This is a very demanding gospel passage and it is hard to resist the urge to soften its demands.

We can soften it by trying to do what one ancient scribe did to make Jesus’ words when the man went away read, “how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God”. By doing so the problem becomes putting faith in the wealth a person has rather than the real obstacle that wealth creates.

We can get caught up in the theory about what the phrase about the camel and the eye of the needle really meant and whether it referred to some geographical location within Jerusalem – a gate that only camels can get through by stooping and reducing their loads. No such gate ever existed.

We can soften it by reading the passage as if this was Jesus trying to test the man by issuing a demand that showed up how futile his piety was; or by Jesus somehow perceiving that wealth was this man’s particular “weak spot” and therefore zeroed in on it to expose that shortcoming. The two had not met before. Jesus looked at the man and loved him; furthermore the man went away sorrowful. So this softening of the passage doesn’t work either.

Jesus' explanation is rather clear: just as large animals simply do not fit through tiny openings, so the wealthy do not fit in the kingdom of God. Even a rich man who has successfully kept all the Decalogue's laws governing social responsibilities, as this devout man has, cannot fit.

But let’s have a look at some of the nuances of the passage that call us to look more closely at it without denying or softening the shocking message.

This is the only time in Mark's Gospel that Jesus makes such a demand about possessions. Although he calls everyone to radical renunciation (8:34-37; 10:28-31), the way in which that call is made vary across the Gospel.

According to 4:19, wealth and its deceptions are not the only things capable of choking the word of God. Being rich is not the unforgivable sin; perhaps neither is it an entirely unscalable obstacle.

This passage highlights that Jesus' primary call is a call to a life of discipleship, not necessarily to a life of poverty. His words to the man “come and follow” and they

echo other calls to discipleship in the gospel of Mark. (1:16-20; 2:14; 8:34; 15:41) They stem from Jesus' love for the man.

In Jesus' time, despite the legacy of the biblical prophets, many people viewed the wealthy as specially blessed by God. That is how Job was viewed by all around him, and by his accusers. Jesus subverts this. The disciples call attention to this when they gasp, "Then who can be saved?" If Jesus has categorically ruled out the rich, then can anyone make it into God's kingdom? When we consider all that commends the rich man in this passage, Jesus stuns us by putting the kingdom of God so far out of reach. But, by contrast, this emphasizes what he says to the disciples when the man has gone his way - that all things are possible for God. (We will return to this promise again in the gospel of Bartimaeus in a week or two. (10:46-52))

Jesus does not ask the man to divest himself of his possessions, but to redistribute them. He instructs the man to redistribute his wealth among the poor. Jesus calls for more than a change in the man's bottom line and more than a permanent relinquishment of his acquisitions; he tells him to change his relationship to the poor--to help them, to identify with them. Could this be why the man went away sorrowful, apparently because he was unable to do what Jesus asks?

What is he truly resisting, this man? He resists surrendering not only wealth, but also status and power. He resists participating in economic justice and handing power over to his poor beneficiaries. The financial, social, and political costs are too great. It seems that we, as a society in Australia today, see things the same way as this man who came up to Jesus.

By contrast to the man, Jesus' disciples have already renounced much of their lives, security, and identity. At the conclusion of the passage, Peter does not boast of his sacrifices but continues to panic about the difficulty of securing eternal life. What hope is there for him, and for the other disciples and for us? In response, rather than focusing on asceticism, Jesus he is calling them into a new community with its own benefits. Privation is not the hallmark of God's kingdom, Jesus reassures Peter. Authentic community and care are the same kind of community and care that Jesus asked the rich man to promote by giving his wealth to the poor. Notice that, along with other things this new community will receive a hundredfold, persecutions accompany such life; as if it were not difficult enough on its own, a life of authentic discipleship also contravenes the world's values.

Maybe, then, this passage is not so unique in its demands, for it is not that dissimilar from others in which Jesus describes a life of discipleship – for example

“let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow.” The rich man's story and Jesus' hyperbole about the camel and the eye of needle remind us that all aspects of what it means to follow Jesus challenge our instincts for self-preservation and security. Jesus does not try to deprive the rich man of his money and power. He asks for more. He tries to claim the man's very own self.

Here is a deeply religious person so well-attuned to his practices that he can sense that there is more out there than what he has experienced so far. He asks Jesus about the "more," but his question focuses on what needs to be added. He seeks the limit, or the next step, but discovers instead that eternal life entails the surrender of one's whole self.

In the end, this story is like a parable - it resists simple explanations and really in the end we can find no basis for softening its message. It makes its claim on us as a community here in Bentleigh – we face the real-life demands of discipleship, being a community of love and hope based on the promise of that God makes salvation possible.

Given our current cultural context, where wealth is everything – the royal commission in to banking revealing deep flaws in the integrity of the system, our lack of care and outright neglect of children on Nauru – let us consider again the gospel's perspective on discipleship, possessions, and abundance. The kingdom of God confronts us with a vision of life and identity quite incompatible with so many of our core presuppositions about wealth, prerogatives, and who we are.

As the Epistle to the Hebrews says

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
