

Sunday 13th October – Mark 10:17-31 – St Andrew’s

We live in one of the wealthiest countries in the world and yet poverty is rife – in fact 3 in 10 children in the UK live in poverty. The inequality is huge - the poorest 50% of the population have less than 5% of the wealth, and the top 1% alone hold 23% of the wealth.

If we look to the culture around us we don't get a very rosy picture of how money is used either – with dodgy uses of money in political circles of every flavour.

Money, then, or as Jesus called it – Mammon – is a powerful force. Jesus describes it as a burdensome ruler seeking to lure humans into its control - something that tempts us to trust in it for happiness.

The 4th Century North African Bishop, Saint Augustine, wrote about Disordered Desires, or Loves. And his idea was that we often put things in the wrong order in our lives. And money is a prime culprit for this – seeking the top spot in our lives, clambering for primacy when it needs to be relegated to its rightful place.

In my own life I see this in play - I often live seeking security and safety in my finances - putting finances at the top of the list of priorities when I make big life decisions. And it's so easy to do this when the culture we live in encourages this kind of thinking – we elevate the rich and successful to positions of power and influence, we are encouraged by advertisers to spend spend spend, and rightly, we're aware of the challenges that come with not having money, of falling into economic poverty. All of this can lead to an imbalance where money becomes our primary desire.

Today's gospel reading from Mark speaks into this issue, where the rich young ruler seeks Jesus' advice on what he can do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus' response was radical back then and continues to be radical today:

‘sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me’

In Jewish thought at the time, being wealthy was thought to be a sign of blessing from God – in fact later Rabbinic literature prohibited selling all your possessions in case you'd become reliant on others. Jesus'

pronouncement, into that context and into ours today, was and is hugely controversial and shocking. He was tapping into an alternative vision for what it meant to live a life devoted to God, a vision that is summed up with his statement that the 'first shall be last, and the last first'.

You see the rich young ruler had his desires in a disordered state, and Jesus sees this and pinpoints it. It wasn't necessarily about wealth, although this has been a powerful idol throughout history, but about what was keeping this person from God. The rich young ruler was willing to do anything to follow God's commands, but he couldn't lay down his wealth – we're told he left disheartened and sorrowful.

And Jesus acknowledges the challenge here – his metaphor of the camel going through the eye of a needle makes it seem impossible, there is no way to thread that needle. A similar story in the Jewish Talmud heightens the stakes by replacing the camel with an elephant! I can tell you from my bedtime reading that you can't squeeze Elmer through the eye of a needle.

Jesus' response to the shock from his disciples at this idea was to say that it's only possible with God. The rich young ruler has got it all upside down. It's not something that you can earn or work towards, or strive for. He wanted to do something to merit eternal life, whereas Jesus taught that eternal life is a gift to be received.

It's not something we earn, it is a gift we receive. And in that way it not only challenges how we order our lives – do we have money and God in the right order – but also challenges the sense of earning things. With money we work to have things for ourselves – we have earned them. We have worked hard, for long hours, and have been paid – and that money is ours. But that's not the case with God – we can't earn his approval, or our salvation. We can only receive it as a free gift through his Son, Jesus Christ.

In Jesus' challenge to the rich young ruler, there is also a beautiful invitation. It's the only time in Mark's gospel that we're told Jesus 'loves' someone – he 'looked at him and loved him'. And with the challenge to sell all he has, is also attached the invitation to 'come, follow me'.

Jesus doesn't ask us to reorder our desires, to put him first, then to crack on with our lives as we were. No, he calls us to follow him. This was the highest call in the ancient Jewish world – the call to become a disciple of a Rabbi. So you could consider this passage the flipside of the passages where Jesus calls the twelve. They all follow, this man doesn't. It's a sincere invitation, and an incredible one where this man is just moments away from close relationship with the King of the World, the creator of the universe. But he turns it down, turning towards his own provision and turning away from God.

Archbishop Justin Welby, in his book 'Dethroning Mammon' presents a powerful vision of the option before us:

'Jesus Christ sets us free through obedience to him. Serving Christ is no slavery in the way we understand the term, but an entry into the most beautiful and glorious freedom. He does not use underhand means to gain power, but lures us into ever more beauty and purpose, ever-deeper relationships and self-realisation, simply by the power of his compelling and unconditional love.

But the more interconnected the world becomes, the more power is held over individuals and nations by...by money. Mammon - the name given by Jesus to this force - gains strength through our obedience. The more power he has, the more the vulnerable suffer'

This is the option set before us and before the rich young ruler in this passage – beauty and purpose and unconditional love, or the suffering of the vulnerable. It's a punchy dichotomy. And all this from a visiting ordinand! My aim here isn't to provoke shame, but it is to make us uncomfortable. I include myself in this completely. Because we shouldn't be comfortable if we're proclaiming allegiance to Jesus on Sunday, but proclaiming allegiance to Mammon in our actions throughout the week. The call is to follow Jesus completely, with every part of our lives, including our money. To lay our finances at the feet of Jesus and allow Him to direct us. To reorder our desires with God as our first love, our primary desire.

And when we get this right – when we keep God as our first love and choose to follow him, day-in and day-out, we are shaped into His likeness and how we use our money begins to change. As we imitate Christ we start to make

strange decisions. Like a friend of mine who works in government on animal welfare policy – a role he has chosen as a place where he can have an impact in caring for creation – and chooses not to go for promotion and more money but to remain at a level where he believes he can have the most impact on animal welfare policy. He has also worked out how much money he needs to live, and chooses to give away all his remaining income to charities that either seek to share Jesus across the world, or protect the environment from destruction. I think about a mentor of mine who sold up and bought a cheap dilapidated house in the Welsh hills so that his children could grow up with a slower pace of life, appreciating God and creation away from the busyness of the city. I think about a woman who runs a debt advice centre and cooks a meal, at her own expense, for 20-30 local people experiencing loneliness and isolation each week.

We might want to reflect on the options before us. What will our response be today, when Mammon comes calling? Will we surrender all we have to God, allowing our desires to be reordered? Or will we cling to what we have earned?

When we accept Jesus' invitation, and reject the invitation of Mammon, beautiful things can happen. The Kingdom of God advances with every pound given to a good cause that beats back the hand of poverty, every meal shared with someone unlike you and every knee bent before the God who reigns over it all.

Amen.