

Sermons at the Anglican Church of Luxembourg

Possessions: possessed by them or stewards of them?

Mark 10:17-31

Getting to my early morning French class, I usually end up sitting down in the classroom and realising I have forgotten something. I think it's getting out of the house early, successive senior moments: one time my iPad with my diary on, this Thursday my smart phone.

Suddenly without my phone I felt very unconnected. It was disconcerting. Almost vulnerable.

20 years ago I didn't always carry a phone, didn't feel the need to be able to respond to every ping: but now...

We grow to rely on these things: they give a sense of security, if we needed to we could...

As it was no-one rang, I picked up emails when I got to my office, and all was fine. But I was intrigued at the feelings this suddenly generated

Bank cards operate in the same way. Ten years ago I had a similar disconnected moment when I travelled in a very rural part of Uganda, high in the mountains on the Rwandan/Congo border. No ATMs, I could only carry cash and even then there was little to spend it on

I was completely dependent for my health and wellbeing on local brothers and sisters in the churches we visited.

I don't think I have ever felt so "helpless", but also so loved and cared for

I needed to accept that love, trust the people I was with, and obey what they told me to do

And its those three dimensions: love, faith and obedience that we find interacting in the encounter between Jesus and a rich, sincere man who ran up to him with a question: what must I do to inherit eternal life

Of all the four gospels, Mark is the shortest. He writes with a unique economy, so every word counts.

And he tells us this all happens as Jesus was setting out on a journey (v17)

That sets the tone for all that follows:

- the call to then "follow me"
- that Jesus designates his followers as "disciples" (v23), which literally means "learners"
- and that the learning they are committed to is of a particular sort: what the rabbis called "walking in the dust of your master", about being close to the master, not just a cerebral thing, but imitating him by following him

This man is attracted to Jesus – he runs, he kneels, he asks, and all of this builds on a life of sincere keeping of the Commandments (v20) that Jesus does not dispute

But he is aware that there is more. And that this "more" lies in the words and the Person of Jesus

Not just his words. But in relationship with Jesus

And it's a relationship that always begins with Jesus, and begun by Jesus

READ v21a

And it is out of love for the man that Jesus then says: READ v21b

You lack one thing...

It could have been all sorts of things: relationships, positional power, a hobby, religion

But for this man it was his wealth that caused him to lack – READ v22

Why lack? Lack what?

And because it was in his relationship with his wealth that was the stumbling block, Jesus describes the thing this man lacks as “treasure in heaven...”

So how was his wealth causing him to lack?

This take us to the second dimension, faith or trust

Jesus unpacks this in private with his dps: READ v23.

They are “perplexed” (v24a) by this encounter as material blessing was seen as a blessing for covenant obedience

I find it hard enough to thread a needle with cotton

Its hard enough, says Jesus for anyone to enter the kingdom of God (v24b)

But it will be easier to thread a needle with a camel than for wealthy people to enter

Which in global economic terms, where the median per capita income is 2,900 dollars pa, is you and me: we are so wealthy

But actually, Jesus isn't talking about relative wealth. He is talking about the power of anything we possess and its place in our lives, its potential power over us be we rich or poor in those global terms

READ v21-22

You could say that this man is unable to choose because he is possessed by his possessions

He is not free to receive the “more” he so much seeks

READ v26-27

One of the problems this man has is that he sees this “more” - eternal life, the kingdom – purely in terms of obligation

“What must I do...” (v17b)

And he fails to grasped by the fact that first and foremost “Jesus, looking at him, loved him...”

The kingdom or eternal life is not about our obligation to God, something we earn

It is about God's loving commitment to us.

The Kingdom of God is about the generous, trustworthy love of God touching the lives of individuals, communities, the whole of the created order

Its about waking up to the fact that ultimately all that we have comes from God

He who gives once will give again: the Lord's prayer literally says, as we eat up bread today we trust you for bread for tomorrow

That was the perspective the man lacked: and so he was trapped to holding on to his wealth

It wasn't about the virtue of giving to the poor. It was about perspective: the perspective of faith

And that brings us to the third dimension: obedience

How do we live out this shift from the fear of scarcity to trust in God's abundance?

It's through obedience, taking seriously our status as disciples, learners on a journey, committed to imitating Jesus

And in the case of the many things we have how it is through obedience that we are set free from being possessed by our possessions to being stewards of them

Stewardship is simply practices living out of the perspective of the OT prayer we say each week as we bring forward the collection: *Yours, Lord is the greatness, the power, the glory, the splendour and the majesty. For everything in heaven and earth is yours. All things come from you, and of your own do we give you.*

Stewardship starts with a growing awareness of the sheer generosity and trustworthiness of Jesus

It grows through small actions not just of giving but of generosity on our part, going beyond what is sensible or reasonable – why, because that's what Jesus' generosity looks like!

It is also responding to those times when Jesus invites us to step outside our comfort zones into opportunities where we can experience Him providing, being able to give to us

Gradually this obedience, consciously practicing these spiritual practices begin to work into our lives a spontaneous attitude that asks, "Lord, what do you want me to do with what is, always, yours anyway, Lord..."

And what is true of us as individuals, as families, becomes true of us as a Church.

Out of what perspective do we handle the resources we have?

There is a letter for everyone about stewardship. It contains up to date facts about our church finances. We have tried to present them in a way that everyone, not just the finance experts, can understand and own

How are love, faith and obedience shaping how you will read that letter?

How will love, faith and obedience shape our handling together of the resources Jesus has entrusted us with?

What is called stewardship.

I have to admit to you: I did have a bank card in my wallet during my time in rural Uganda

To start with it gave me a sense of security

But once you realise there are no ATMs you wake up to something much bigger, better and more trustworthy: love, faith and eventually obedience