

Sermons at the Anglican Church

Preached by Rev. Geoff Read on Sunday 21st October 2018

Mark 10:35-45

Last week we looked at the irony of Jesus' response to the rich, young ruler who falls at his feet asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life"

Jesus looking at him, loved him and said: One thing you lack

Lack?

And then he puts his finger on all that was coming between this man and the "more" he so much sought: his wealth, how he was possessed by his possessions

So Jesus' antidote is tailor-made for him – go sell, free yourself to follow and trust me

And what does Jesus then promise him? "Riches in heaven", the kingdom, explained in terms that speak powerfully to this man's addiction

This whole section of Mark's gospel that we are looking at Sunday by Sunday is about discipleship

And how Jesus frees people to follow him as they grow more and more aware of His love for them, how they can have faith or trust in his utter dependability, and how we grow into this freedom to follow through day by day obedience

In addition to the rich young man (Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first) there were the disciples who argued in Ch 9 about greatness – as Jesus places a child in their midst he said "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and be servant of all" (9:35)

The disciples get it wrong again as they shoo away children: "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (10:15)

And here they are again – first James and John and then the other ten too, jockeying for position to which Jesus says: "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant ... the slave of all." (v43b, 44)

Well, not just that: the hammer comes in v45: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Last week I shared a saying about discipleship used by rabbis: "being covered in the dust of your rabbi"

To be a follower of Jesus is to be an imitator of Jesus: and that involves being so close that it's as if the dust thrown up by his feet would cover you too

This week its different people – James and John, different blockage – we want to sit with you in your glory: they are looking for greatness through position

But the same antidote as for the rich young man: again, Jesus puts his finger on their spiritual blockage, their addiction, in this case to identity through status

And Jesus speaks to it in ways uniquely appropriate to them

As Jews they would be familiar with the idea of a cup in OT theology – a symbol of feasting and celebration but also of punishment and suffering

They would also have been familiar with the OT theology of the word we translate baptism – of being forcibly plunged down into the depths, overwhelmed, like when at bath time you push a model boat under the water until it is full.

At the time of Jesus Jews were also seeing baptism as a sign of renewal, exciting anticipation of the coming Kingdom of the Messiah

So sensing the “more” that Jesus can give, longing to share in His glory (v37), James and John excitedly say “Yes”, they are up for drinking the cup and being baptised

Unlike Jesus’ immediate call to the rich young man to sell and be free and follow, it will only be later that James and John will begin to get it, realise what Jesus’ offer of freedom means as they see him:

- drinking a cup, only this time its drinking to the dregs the cup of suffering
- and seeing him baptised, but in this case overwhelmed with suffering as he is crucified

And probably not even then: more likely they will only begin to get the strange freedom of this as they start to get their heads around his resurrection - all the things Jesus predicts a third time (10:32-34) immediately before this incident takes place

And if discipleship is about walking so closely that you are covered in the dust of the rabbi, what will this very understanding mean for them?

Understanding that starts with pondering the last words of this incident, as Jesus says: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Here is what is on offer to the disciples

This is the “more” the rich young ruler senses he lacks

This is the “greatness” James and John long for

It’s the offer he makes to you and me, to anyone who senses there is “more” but cannot find it, earn it, get it however hard we try

And again: Jesus perfectly matches the words to the blockage, a blockage he speaks of in terms of slavery

He has already said that this “more”, this lacking has to do with becoming as a slave and now he speaks of a ransom

In the time of Jesus ransoms were common: they were simply what was paid to set slaves free

When paid, it wiped the slate clean, a ransom irreversibly changed the status of the person from slave to free

But you have to realise: just as selling and giving to the poor was not a pious requirement for the rich young man who has asked What must I do?

So here also: its not by becoming slave-like and slaving for others that we become worthy to become followers of Jesus

Its allowing ourselves to be ransomed slaves, that we are gifted the “more” for which we long

And the one who ransoms – its Jesus

And the price he pays – his life

To put it another way, allowing this undeserved love to touch us is like being coated in that dust of the rabbi

It is so simple. But it is so hard. How hard: look at the struggle of the rich young ruler, even of the disciples. So hard to let go of our own controlling grip on life, so hard to trust Jesus

A Canadian friend of mine told me about his Uncle who escaped from a POW camp during WW2

At one point to get away he had to swim a lake but found himself caught in weed

The harder he struggled, the more he became entangled

Until he realised that freedom lay in what was most counter-intuitive – to stop struggling, to relax and to float free

“Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and be servant of all.”

“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

We are among that “many”

We are among the slaves

Slaves who before they can serve need to allow themselves to be ransomed, freed

Freed by the life, freed by the love of Jesus