

Sunday between 23<sup>rd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> October [30]

Luke 18: 15-30

A joke is told about the very rich man who successfully pleads with God to let him take one thing with him to heaven when he died. Once he'd got the all clear he set about trying to work out the most valuable thing he could carry to take with him, supposing that in heaven the same things would hold value as on earth. He finally decided to sell all he had and buy the biggest block of gold he could afford. When he died he was allowed to take his block of gold with him to heaven, St. Peter on the gates had been warned that this man was allowed to bring in one article of luggage and ushered him through. As they approached God asked St. Peter, "what did he bring?" and Peter replied – only a paving slab.

We are all familiar with the Christian teachings on wealth and we all know we should be careful to avoid storing up treasures for ourselves. But we have become quite good at finding arguments that convince us that Jesus' teachings do not necessarily mean that we can't be rich. Think for a minute about when Jesus said that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the gates of heaven. There is a teaching which you may well be aware of that the 'eye of a needle' was another name for a gate in a city's walls which was narrow and a fully laden camel would have to have its cargo removed to allow it to pass. The idea being that the teaching then was simply one to encourage us not to take too much, to store greedily our wealth and possessions, but that it was ok to be self-sufficient and financially stable. There has, in fact, been no evidence found to support this theory, nowhere is it written that city gates were called eyes of needles and it may well be that this theory grew up from rich people not wishing to give away everything they own but also wanting to convince themselves that they were good Christians.

Although Jesus often spoke in parables, it appears that this was not one of those times, he said what he meant and he meant what he said, and the hyperbole was a deliberate attempt to show how ridiculous it was to try to serve God and money side by side. Jesus' teaching on shunning the lure of wealth and possessions makes a lot of sense, and it is perhaps even more obvious in its risks in our modern age than it has ever been in the past. Not only does it draw us away from nurturing relationships with others and turn us into workaholics if we are not careful, it damages our society as a whole when we give in to it. How many of us are worried about how our children and grandchildren will ever be able to afford to buy a home, or how both parents generally have to work full time in a family just to make ends meet thereby having to spend more time away from their children than they would otherwise choose? And how many of us worry about the stress that this lifestyle puts on those who live it, worried about friends who live fast paced city lives. And who really thinks our society is much improved because of it? The evidence doesn't support it. More and more people, including young people, are anxious and disconnected relationally when the relative prosperity and the technological advances convince us that we have progressed somehow. We have shifted, but not necessarily for the better, and where our societal shift has taken us further from God, we are certainly spiritually poorer for it.

God knows what's best for us, because we are God's creation. We were created in the image of God to be people who thrive in relationships with others. We are happiest when surrounded by like-minded people, our friends, our families. And we are creatures full of compassion. We live in a society with many opportunities to support charities on large and small scales and we welcome such initiatives. We can't bear to see others suffering, we want to help. We want to make our society a better place, to make a difference that both ourselves and others can benefit from.

The pulpit is not the place for intrusive questions about individual financial circumstances, indeed each one of us will have a unique perspective on scripture passages such as the one we heard today. However, Jesus spoke of money on many occasions, and this is an opportunity to reflect on how we respond to Jesus' challenge. What does it look like to shift our focus from the material to the spiritual? How might we have a positive effect on our local

community with our own actions and example? How do we show that with God the impossible becomes possible?

It is through Christian communities who are willing to stand up against the destructive nature of the fast and furious, stress fuelled society in which we find ourselves today that change can be made. Part of our commitment to set an example of living the Christian life must include others seeing us putting our relationships first, not taking the best paid job if that affects our family life, not living a life dissatisfied with what we have because our neighbour's car is a bit better, or their house a bit bigger, or their clothes a bit more expensive.

Churches are not here to tell others how to live their life, how to spend their money and how to prioritise their time – we will each of us need to work that stuff out for ourselves. What the church must do with its teaching and example is to make Jesus' teaching accessible to everyone and how it relates to their life. Storing up treasures for ourselves on earth will make us poor towards God yet having nothing on earth can mean that we possess everything.

If we take nothing else from today's gospel we should be reminded that those babies Jesus told us to be more like in order to enter the kingdom of heaven are not concerned with the stresses of material wealth that bind us, they seek simply to love and be loved and in that simplicity set an example to us all. May we come face to face with Christ in the deep trust and unconditional love of the children we see, that we may experience the joy of relationship with God.