

TRINITY XX 2018 Proper 23/OT28

On the day of Oscar Romero's canonization

I don't know if you saw the story in the news this week about the wife of the former head of the Central Bank of Azerbaijan, who is the subject of an enquiry about her wealth. She attracted attention from the Treasury by spending over £16 million over the past few years at her 'local' shop, Harrods, where she even owns a parking space. I'm not sure about the probity of making her name and case known in the press – it seems to me that such enquiries should remain sub-judice until a finding is made - call me old fashioned! However, it does give us some insight into the lives of the rich and super rich – and also helps us in our exploration of the Gospel reading today.

There is an urgency when this man runs up to Jesus, kneels before him, calls him 'Good Teacher' (nothing like a bit of flattery) and asks the question: '*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*' The response and interaction between the two record the only occasion in Mark's Gospel where an individual call to new life offered by Jesus – the life of the Kingdom - proves ineffectual. Why is this? We know that this person has always sought to be faithful to the Law of Moses. He is obviously well versed in the Salvation History of his people. He knows the way in which God has shown his faithfulness – the promise to Abraham, Moses and the Exodus from slavery, the Prophets' call to righteous life. He wants something he knows is missing and which only God can fill.

Jesus responds by listing what we might regard as the social commandments – and they are all things one shouldn't do: *You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud* - to which Jesus adds the duty to honour one's parents. In giving this list, there is some sense in which Torah life focused in this way seems rather dour. It might be that Mark the Gospel writer is leading us on a journey to consider what might turn all of this into positivity - a bit of a spiritual cliff hanger for the reader.

The man's response is eager – he has tried to fulfil Torah since he was a youth – he has tried to stick to the letter of the Biblical Law, yet there is still something missing. He really wants the Promised Land within his life. And **we** know that he is asking the right person! Then there is a wonderful moment in the narrative: *Jesus, looking at him, loved him*. The phrase seems to indicate that Jesus was so moved by this man's faithfulness to the Law that he expressed his emotion, perhaps by giving him a hug. Then the crunch phrase comes: '*You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*' *When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*

Think of that phrase from Hebrews this morning: *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.* The sharpness of God's words work here as they are offered in sincerity and love by Jesus to this man.

I wouldn't mind betting that at some point or other we have all felt the emptiness this man feels, this desire for something beyond the mere possession of possessions, as it were. It might even apply to fundamental aspects of our relationships: 'I own a large house,' 'I have perfect children,' 'I have a great education,' 'I have a thriving marriage,' 'I have all that I need,' 'I am spiritually blessed,' and so on. Yet there is still something missing -the indefinable sense of absence. We echo the man's question to Jesus, 'What can I do?'

'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' Is this it? Is this the answer? It is certainly not the one the man expects. On one hand he has wealth and is faithful to God in his religious practices. On the other hand, Jesus seems to offer nothing other than godly poverty. The man turns away from a relationship with Jesus because he can't let go, trapped by his own inability to do so – even if it is ultimately to gain his deepest desire. No wonder he goes away grieving.

In this Gospel reading Jesus leads the man, and then the disciples on a journey towards and understanding of the fulness of life which is found in him. This is our journey too. This can be encapsulated in three ways. First is a call to **Fulfil the Commandments** as this man so faithfully does. Jesus is not casting this away. For us this aspect of our faith has been diluted to the point where most people would have a hard job listing all Ten Commandments, and yet they stand as the bedrock of understanding our relationship with God and with one another. We are so busy diluting Biblical teaching because we have a fear of being seen to criticize things we disagree with or even things that we might strongly feel are wrong, that we end up being unable to offer the value of something upon which the whole of our society is founded. Fulfilling the Commandments means revealing through our lives the foundation of moral happiness. We ourselves might sometimes fail at this, yet we know that God is Love and always forgives the repentant sinner.

Next, **Christians are called to a spirit of poverty and detachment.** What does this mean? I think that to follow the way of Jesus, our spirituality is always about letting go. Jesus has already explained this regarding his own life twice in the Gospel, and he will say it again as he talks of the ultimate letting go - his passion and death – the journey towards Resurrection Life - that Resurrection Life which is then open to all who seek him. How does this relate to wealth? As Jesus goes on to explain, the Kingdom does not exclude people of wealth – after all, Mark tells us that Jesus loved this man. What it **is** about is how we use our wealth, or perhaps more correctly about what our wealth does to us. Wealth can trap and ensnare people so that they can't see the wood for the trees.

How wealthy do you consider yourself? I found a website which computes wealth in statistical terms. My stipend as your vicar (about £25,000) means that I am the 61,946,729th richest person in the world! I am in the top 1.03%. Even if your income is £5,000 a year – you are still in the top 20% of the wealthiest people in the world. Does this begin to sound like a stewardship sermon? Perhaps. I would ask everyone to think about their giving to Holy Trinity to enable the proclamation of the Gospel to be carried out efficiently – this is something to consider year by year (and our last campaign was well over a year ago).

However, by noting the focus on money and possessions which I'm sure all of us do to some extent, we should be enabled to see that we sometimes confuse these things with life itself - our seeking a spirit of poverty and detachment is actually about the way we interact with our fellow travellers in life. We need to balance our concern for money to the way in which we reveal the True Life Christ offers us through the example of self-giving love.

This leads me to the third point from today's Gospel which is a direct call to each of us from Jesus himself: **'Follow Me.'** Following Jesus is about the radical liberation from something that ensnares us to something that ennobles us. This liberation through Jesus is the most radical and positive gift we could possibly receive. Following Jesus - seeking to serve and love the world in and through his name and by his example - takes us beyond our own narrow self-interests and enables us to offer this same liberation to all we meet. Knowing his love within our lives enables us to know that whatever our circumstances, he walks beside us and leads us - but **we** are the ones responsible in allowing this to happen, although the Holy Spirit will always be there prompting and urging!

Let me finish with words of Oscar Romero: 'Let us empower ourselves so that we can establish the Kingdom of God through our word, our community life, and our example. Let us not forget that we are servants of the Kingdom of God. Jesus has told us how we can enter the Kingdom of God: living these three conditions - observing the commandments, clothing ourselves with a spirit of poverty and detachment and, above all, following Jesus who is the eternal wisdom of God, who became flesh and made his dwelling among us,' - to reveal the Love God bears for each one of us. Amen and Amen.



Amos 5: 6-7, 10-15

⁶ Seek the Lord and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it.

⁷ Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!

¹⁰ They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.

¹¹ Therefore, because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.

¹² For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.

¹³ Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time.

¹⁴ Seek good and not evil, that you may live;

and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,

just as you have said. ¹⁵ Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Hebrew 4: 12-end

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. ¹³ And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

¹⁴ Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested^[d] as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Mark 10: 17-31

¹⁷ As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ 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; Honour your father and mother."'

²⁰ He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' ²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money^[c] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' ²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' ²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is^[d] to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' ²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another,^[e] 'Then who can be saved?' ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

²⁸ Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' ²⁹ Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,^[f] ³⁰ who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'