



Sermon St John's Cambridge, 13th October 2024

May the words of my mouth...

What must I do to inherit eternal life? Not eternal life in the sense of some indeterminate future, but full & eternal & abundant life with God, in the gift of His kingdom, now – as well as beyond, in the heavenly realm?

It is, perhaps, one of the profoundest and most challenging encounters of the Gospel. One that contains, in essence, the entire Gospel message... its call and invitation to life. But it is also a living communication with you & I now, in the present moment. Because that is how the Gospel works: as we listen, we discover words not merely spoken long ago, but the Living & active word of Christ (as Hebrews puts it) addressed to us now. His call, His challenge, and His gift to us, in the present moment...

So I want you to imagine, if you will, having that conversation – as did the rich young man – with Jesus in your life now; and see what happens, and whether (as you live with these words & this encounter, over the next few days) it speaks to you in new ways....

Like everyone else you are searching. You are looking for an answer to the big questions. You are – even if life is good (& it may not be especially good) – looking for something or someone to make sense of your life; your hopes and fears; your frustrations and disappointments; someone to take away your anxiety and to give you the assurance of peace.

And suddenly, travelling along the road of life, you meet Jesus – or someone who radiates the presence of Jesus. And you are drawn to ask him a question, something you've always wanted to ask, but have never quite dared. *'What must I do to inherit life?'* Eternal life: not the kind of life that happens if I get my pension or retirement benefits, but life of a different order: such that I will never know that deep down existential fear or anxiety ever again?

And what does Jesus say to you?

What are the commandments? What are the things you have been brought up to know, the age-old wisdom of living well: the Ten Commandments of the Hebrew scriptures (the basics of living a good life, of loving God and neighbour, and not crossing the boundaries laid down, that we are not meant to cross).

I wonder how you respond? You may or not have kept them all, but you are quite frank and tell Jesus about what you have managed to do, and what you have – quite honestly - failed to do, or not do.

And Jesus looks at you... He looks at you with love – and he sees right inside of you, inside of your soul, recognising what might be the key challenge for you: the very thing that prevents you from following Christ, whole-heartedly, with all your heart and soul and mind and strength? That hidden challenge or inner dimension – known only to you – which, divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow?

In the case of the rich man it is his great wealth.

But of course it may be something quite different with you (& I): such as our attachment to pride or status, our lust or anger, our possessiveness of others, or our fear of being exposed, the imposter syndrome.

+In our Gospel, the rich *young* man (a detail we draw from Matthew's account) is shocked to be challenged so profoundly, that he goes away grieving – unable to let go of that one thing that stands in the way of eternal life, now. We don't know if he ever comes back, and meets with Jesus again (I like to imagine that he does, maybe even that he bumps into the risen Christ, after that 1st Easter) but we're left with an unresolved problem... what is Jesus saying to us, personally; how is he challenging us (with his good news) to discover eternal life now, without any obstacles in its path, as well as after death. And how do we respond?

It's easy of course to miss the point. To think that eternal life – the gift of unadulterated over-flowing life with God and in the fullness of our humanity – is impossible. We simply can't get there. Like the camel trying to get through the eye of the needle, try as we do, we just can't squeeze through: we're not good enough, however hard we try.

The eye of the needle, as a striking metaphor, being that narrow gateway into Jerusalem, which heavily loaded camels could not get through without being unencumbered of their load.

Yes, it's simply too difficult, life has enough challenges of its own, without asking the impossible. So why even bother? I don't know if that's how it feels to you, as you meet Jesus or the one who radiates Jesus to you? As the disciples asks Jesus in desperation, '*Then who can be saved... Look, Lord, we have left everything to follow you.*' Our hopes, our ambitions, our former way of life, our street cred...

But this is to miss the point, to fail to allow the kernel of our Gospel to break open, and its heart brake open your heart, that you might find life in all its fullness. For God's grace is pure gift; his divine love is unconditional and unlimited in scope, as St Paul reminds us. His presence and call is always waiting to break in, at any moment; his light is always just around the corner, but never wholly out of sight. His challenge & judgement is always tempered by a far greater mercy. As Jesus says, '*...for God all things are possible.*' We just need to open our eyes and look upon him, without fear, and be changed, receiving the salvation that he yearns to bring.

Following Jesus is not easy... It asks everything of us, and it can involve struggle and sacrifice, sometimes protracted struggle, as well as abundant joy and blessing -

...as I began to discover, when I first encountered Jesus' call on my life, at a privileged independent boarding school, aged 15, and felt moved to give up all that I had, to follow Jesus – even giving up all my records, donning a pair of sandals & getting up very early, every morning, to pray, much to the amusement of my peers...

But it need not be like this, for God in his infinite grace and love, is always waiting to embrace us and enter in— like the Christ of Holman Hunt’s painting, knocking on the door of our hearts... All we need to do is to be open, to dare to receive him; and to dare to let go (over a lifetime) of that (maybe) one thing that prevents us from receiving Him fully: be it success or wealth or pride or addiction – that one thing that prevents an undivided heart, able to receive the heart of God himself.

The God who, in Jesus, loves us and cares for us, and is here for us, as we journey with him, ever deeper into the abundant life that He gives.

+Nothing could be more life-changing or transforming than daring to respond, ever more deeply, to the voice of that love; and daring to radiate that love + wisdom + power to those around us: in our daily lives + work.

Remember, Jesus looks at you with love... and as he challenges you, he does it, not out of a desire to place impossible obstacles in your path. Nothing could be further from the truth. He does it because he loves you and he wants you to discover the unfathomable joy of following him whole-heartedly, so that his heart may beat with yours, today and every day. And then, like the first disciples, we discover that: *‘There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or jobs or status or fields for his sake who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – and in the age to come eternal life’*.

Whatever the challenge may be for us – in our daily lives and responsibilities – Jesus is always calling us. He is always waiting for us, just around the corner, yearning to draw us more fully into the glorious abundance and costly challenge of his kingdom. Right where we are, in the midst of life – in the classroom or lecture hall, in the hospital ward, at home, in the office or in the market-place. *‘Follow me’* Jesus says, *‘and I will show you what life is’*. True & abundant life –however challenging it may at times be – overflowing, rooted in the abundant life of God, and enfolded in Christ’s love, and inspired by his ever-present Holy Spirit. It really does work. Trust me! And nothing could be more transforming.

I wonder how you are going to respond to Christ today, this week, in this new term, and be transformed: in prayer, and worship and holy communion, in sharing with others, and in our going out from here, to face those people and situations and challenges that you may meet this week? Facing into a world in so much uncertainty and need, but also so much beauty & God-given potential, with the radiant light and love of Jesus Christ, a God who loves you (& all creation) deeply and always will.

It is of course a life-long journey, this challenge – as the rich young man experienced - of listening to God’s call, and daring to follow Jesus ever more closely. A journey new every morning. But it is well worth it: a journey, no less, into eternal life. *+In the name of the Father...*

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