



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Sunday Evening Worship with Prayer for Healing

4th October 2020

Readings:

Psalm 136:1-9

Mark 10:17-27

There was once a rich young man with the whole of his life ahead of him. He had what so many in the world yearn for; wealth, youth, education, influence. But life took an unexpected turn. The experience of combat, imprisonment and illness changed him radically, and once he was back in the safety of his wealthy home, it was no longer enough to fulfil him. There was a hunger that his former life could not satisfy.

Things began to change when he met someone with a highly contagious disease. Instead of running as fast as possible in the opposite direction, our rich young man embraced and kissed the infectious man, breaking ALL the social distancing rules. This unlikely meeting suffused him with a sense of Christ's presence. As he prayed about his future, he sensed a call from God 'rebuild my church'. The rich young man sold some of his father's property to begin the restoration of a local derelict church building. Furious with his son, the father brought him in front of the bishop and demanded that repayment was made. This was the moment that he had been waiting for. God was calling him to a new life. He stripped off down to his boxers, stripped off the old life, and walked off into the countryside hastily clad in a rough tunic by the Bishop, to begin the next step of his Christian discipleship.

I'm sure you've recognised the story of the early life of St Francis of Assisi who the church celebrates today.

God did indeed call him to rebuild his church, but on a grand scale, forming a worldwide Christian community based on poverty, chastity and obedience, characterised by love, joy and humility. Francis had a profound influence on the Christian church with his emphasis on serving the poor, and cherishing the natural world. His influence can be seen reaching right down to today with Pope Francis taking his name and continuing those Christian values in his own ministry.

And so we come to another rich young man, the character in today's gospel reading. Something was missing in his comfortable life. Like Francis, wealth didn't bring peace. He wanted to take that next step in faith. What should he do to inherit eternal life? Jesus' answer to him was direct and shocking.

He looked into the young man's heart and loved him.

Here was someone who could become one of the close disciples of Jesus; who could follow, share the common life and bring the good news to others. 'You lack one thing' Jesus replied 'go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me'.

Jesus looked at that young man and knew that his self worth, his identity, his security was built upon his wealth. His many possessions had turned his gaze inwards. Maybe the wealth he had was built upon the oppression of others, the possession of slaves for example. The riches themselves were not the problem, they hadn't stopped him living a virtuous life, but they were becoming a hindrance to fullness of life, his true calling, and a Christlike love for those whose lives were constrained by poverty in a way he couldn't understand. Look beyond yourself Jesus was saying, there's a world out there. There isn't a spirituality or eternal life tick box. It's about your whole life. Its about a relationship with me, and if you enter into that relationship you will understand about salvation. The giving up of all your stuff is the first step to following me; freeing yourself to receive grace.

For the rich young man, for all of us, it is about the heart. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells us that where our treasure is, there our heart will be.

I don't think that the command Jesus gives to him means that all of us should sell everything, give to the poor and follow the kind of community life that St Francis led.

Poverty of itself is of no value, indeed it can destroy, stunt, oppress and dehumanise.

But as Christians, we all want and need Jesus to look at us, love us, and tell us what we lack.

What holds us back from following him with all our heart?

What secret places of our heart say to Jesus 'you can have this bit of me, but that bit you are not allowed in'? Is there pride or unconfessed sin?

Are there areas that need healing? Do we need to forgive?

Is there selfishness or stubbornness? What do we lack but successfully hide?

What must we do to inherit eternal life? To let Jesus show us what it is we lack, what holds us back from following him with our whole heart. It's different for all of us.

St Francis recognised in himself that the playboy life was ultimately empty, he wasn't happy, he looked at the life of Jesus and heard the call to follow him,

to let him into the part of his heart that was addicted to possessions. Consequently, he became full of joy, and that joy spilled out to the world. He became truly himself - the person Jesus called him to be.

The rich young man in our gospel story however went away sorrowful.

We are not told the outcome. Did he go away and forget about Jesus?

Did he throw himself into more and more acquisitions

to numb the emptiness inside? Did he forever regret this missed opportunity?
Or did he one day, respond to Jesus' call in a way we will never know about.

Our salvation isn't based on works but on the grace of God, and faith in Christ.

But it is not a cheap grace, and an indication that our hearts are open to grace
is that our lives are changed, that we accept those little challenges and calls when Jesus points
out to us the areas where we lack.

And if it all seems too difficult to contemplate,
let us remember the words of Jesus:

'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'