

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 58”

Matthew 19:16-30

If you haven't picked up on it – those of you who have been coming along here for a while and know that we're working our way through this Gospel of Matthew – I should just remind you that for a couple of weeks we're taking things in a slightly different order from the way Matthew has set them out. It's really because some of these little episodes in chapters 19 and 20 fit in better with the other stuff that's going on in our church at the moment. Last week we looked at the healing of two blind men in the context of a healing service. Next week we're going to be looking at Jesus and the children as we have an infant dedication. And this week, as we have been thinking about the commitment of those who will be working with our children and young people over the next twelve months, we have a story about commitment to the life of the Kingdom of God which Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, has come to inaugurate.

Someone comes to ask Jesus a pretty important question, a question really of life and death. It's a man who is apparently both young and rich, and, according to Luke, a ruler in the community. He has wealth; he has youthful energy; he has status in the community. Many of you here this morning have one or two of those attributes – one or two might have even three. Compared to the rest of the population of the world, we're all probably in the category of wealthy in material terms, actually. Really, this man has it all. What a fine figure of a man! And his address to Jesus – “*Teacher*” – shows that he is a person who has respect and a certain amount of humility, too. Yet something is missing in his life. He is still seeking, and he comes to Jesus to enquire about the prospect of eternal life.

Despite all that he has and is, this young man wants to find out a bit more about the possibility of assurance in the future. He is looking for meaning and security – what he has is not enough. So Jesus decides to tease out of him exactly what he does want. “You want some kind of assurance, some kind of meaning to life. Well, doesn't the law give you that?” He asks him about keeping to the Law of Moses, about his obligations to the rest of society as he follows the commandments that God gave his people through Moses. The Law was intended to provide structure, a framework for society to function properly so that everyone would know some kind of security. Surely following that would provide the young man with all he needed to be sure of things in this life and the next?

The man replies that he has done all that. He is no criminal. He has done his best to keep to the letter of the Law and we have no reason to doubt that he has broken any of the commandments that Jesus mentions here. He is a good citizen, a good Jew. But still he wants to know a bit more. There's more to it than just external conformity to a structure, to a set of rules. That needs to be accompanied by an inward obedience, an awareness of his priorities. Jesus somehow picks up that the man has his life focussed on the wrong things – in this particular case, on his wealth.

Jesus grasps the bull by the horns and says, “*If you want to be perfect.*” The idea of being “*perfect*” here has echoes of the way it was thought about in the Old Testament – undivided loyalty and whole-hearted obedience. It’s to do with a goal, an end in view, a finished product. Jesus is saying, “If you really want to achieve what’s in your sights ...” Anyway, the man is told to go and get rid of his wealth – to give it all away to the poor. If the man wants eternal life, if he wants to be a part of the life of the Kingdom of God, he needs to concentrate on that alone – to clear his life of all other concerns and follow Jesus totally. At the moment, despite his apparent desire to discover more about eternal life, he finds his security in his wealth: that is at the top of his agenda. And now we see Jesus making explicit what some of you may recall he said at the very beginning of his ministry as recorded in Mark’s Gospel: “*Repent and believe the good news*” or “*Give up your own agenda and trust me for mine*”. In this case, the man’s agenda is devoted to his money and property to the extent that he is unwilling to trust Jesus for anything else.

Giving up his wealth is a step too far and he is not prepared to take it. Both Jesus – who (again according to Mark) “*loved him*” – and the man himself – who “*went away sad*” – are upset by this. The man was so close to getting involved in the Kingdom, but there was this one thing that he just could not give up, one thing that stood between him and eternal security. And he wanders off, back to his land and his money. We don’t know what happened to him after this, although there was a strong tradition in the early centuries that this man was, in fact, Barnabas, who did eventually sell up all he had and joined the early apostles.

As he disappears and Jesus turns back to his disciples, who have been watching all this, Jesus points out the impossibility of rich people entering the Kingdom of God. It’s a stark pronouncement and one that should fill us with a sense of unease as, as we’ve already said, all of us here are relatively rich compared with the vast majority of the world’s population – and some of us are very rich! To emphasise his point, he takes a bizarre image and says that it is actually harder than a camel going through the eye of a needle. In other words, it’s downright impossible. Some people have tried to lessen the force of Jesus’ words by appealing to a mediaeval idea that there was small gate in the city wall known as “The Eye of the Needle”, but that was certainly not something that was known in Jesus’ time. He’s talking literally here. And in so doing he turns completely on its head the Jewish notion that riches are a blessing from God. For Jesus they are a handicap to participation in the life of the Kingdom of God as they can so easily assume an importance in our lives that causes us to take our eyes off Jesus and his ways. That’s tough talk for people like us, isn’t it? And it certainly flies in the face of those who teach what is known as “The Prosperity Gospel”.

And the disciples pick up on it too. “*Who then can be saved?*” they ask Jesus. If even the people we thought were blessed by God are to be left outside this new Kingdom, if even the rich and the law-abiding cannot find security, what hope is there for anyone else? Matthew tells us that “*Jesus looked at them ...*” (as he does elsewhere), maybe suggesting that he gave them a long, hard stare (the kind my mum gives tardy waiters in restaurants). And he replies that they are right – no-one can be saved by themselves. There’s nothing any of us can do. But with God – well, that’s a different matter. Anything is possible with him.

And there’s the key to this whole issue. It’s only reliance on God that can guarantee any of us eternal security, that can grant us entry to the Kingdom, that can “*save*” us. And if that’s the only thing that can do it, then God needs to be the main priority in our lives. He needs to be the first item – the only item – on our agenda. We’re back to where Jesus started once again: the need to focus exclusively on the Kingdom of God – that’s what The Sermon On The Mount is mainly about. And on Jesus’ agenda there is only this one item – trusting in God. He’s the main priority. The rich young man had his wealth at the top of his agenda: that was his priority. The disciples, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, have had status at the top of theirs. And in this conversation Peter has a certain self-centredness as his priority (v27) – “*Look, Lord, what wonderful followers we are. Aren’t we impressive?*”

But as always, the question has to be asked of us. Where do you look for your security and meaning? What is your priority? What’s top of your agenda? It all boils down to what you’d be prepared to give up for God: what are the really important things as far as you’re concerned?

Maybe for some of us here today it is the same as it was for that rich, young seeker – your material goods. For you, the main thing is your home, your bank balance, your pension fund. That’s where you feel your security lies. Whatever else happens, that has to be protected, because, in the end, you think it will protect you. And it means that amassing that has to come first – before any kind of consideration of the ethics of how you get it, before any reflection upon how much of your time and energy it is taking up, before any attempt to discover if it’s what God really wants for you.

For others it might be status. You want to ensure that you have a good standing in the eyes of others. And that needs to be demonstrated in a way that others can see it – by a title, by letters after your name, by the clothes you wear, simply by ensuring that everyone knows you’re there. You don’t really know what God thinks about it – nor do you care, quite frankly – but you think that it will bring you some kind of comfort, some kind of security.

Or how about your health and fitness, your dogged attempts to resist any appearance of ageing? Trips to the gym are far more important than trips to the prayer meeting. Physical fitness is much more to be desired than spiritual fitness. That's the main thing and you believe, deep down, that in the end it will be that which provides your security.

You may have the priority that the rich, young man also had near the top of his list – keeping all the rules and regulations. This is a real temptation for many of us, because it seems such a right thing to do. You try very hard indeed to keep to a tight framework of rules and dogma, because in keeping of them there is an enormous sense of security. That's why religious fundamentalism is so attractive in today's confusing post-modern culture. It gives us somewhere safe to take refuge. Someone else can do the thinking for us and all we have to do is stick to the rules. Now, I'm not for one moment saying here that we have no responsibility to keep to God's laws or to stick to the basic tenets of our faith, but if that is done in order to try and safeguard our security, rather than because we love God and want to do as he asks, then the rules have taken over top spot from God himself.

Jesus even makes it clear here that those who follow him, who want to participate in the life of the Kingdom, will have to put him above the love of their home and family (v29). Now there's a challenge! Clearly that doesn't mean that everyone who follows Jesus has to leave their home and family – it's obvious from the rest of the New Testament that that is definitely not the case. But if it should ever come down to a choice between the two, what would your priority be?

You see, that's how you can tell a person's priorities. That's how you can discern what really is at the top of their agenda. What's your attitude when that thing is threatened? How much time and energy do you put into that? Where are your resources focussed? It's a bit like spiritual *Through The Keyhole*, that programme in which a panel had to try and identify a person simply by looking at the contents of their home (I say "had", but I think it's recently been resurrected, hasn't it?). Look at what things take up time in your life, the way you spend your money, the things that you put most energy into, the things that you fight most doggedly to retain – would those things mark you out as a follower of Jesus Christ?

Now this is tough talking from Jesus here. And for prosperous, Western Christians like ourselves, who have been trained to think of the accumulation of material goods and education and healthcare and steady incomes and all the rest as a right – indeed, who may have been seduced by the Prosperity preachers into believing that it's all a sign of God's favour on us – then it is very uncomfortable indeed. Think very hard about your own priorities, then read this story again: and where Jesus says to the young man, "*If you want to be perfect*", put your own priority into that story and see where it takes you. It's only by

following Jesus, by putting him at the very top of the list, that you can ever really be sure of your eternal future – and so have a sense of security in this life now.

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As he disappears and Jesus turns back to his disciples, who have been watching all this, Jesus points out the impossibility of rich people entering the Kingdom of God. And in so doing he turns completely on its head the Jewish notion that riches are a blessing from God. For Jesus they are a handicap to participation in the life of the Kingdom of God as they can so easily assume an importance in our lives that causes us to take our eyes off Jesus and his ways. "*Who then can be saved?*" the disciples ask Jesus. If even the people we thought were blessed by God are to be left outside this new Kingdom, if even the rich and the law-abiding cannot find security, what hope is there for anyone else? Jesus replies that they are right – no-one can be saved by themselves. There's nothing any of us can do. But with God – well, that's a different matter. Anything is possible with him.

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Questions for discussion

1. What was/is the point of keeping the commandments if they couldn't guarantee eternal life?

2. Jesus seems very uncompromising about rich people being saved. Do you think it's true for all people for all time? Why/why not?
3. *Vv29,30* pose all kinds of problems for us. What problems do you find in these verses? How do you respond to them?
4. Reflect on your own priorities. What does this passage have to say to you? What are you going to do about it?