

Sunday 28

For the sake of clarity let us divide the Lord's story into its three parts. The first part is the Lord's exchange with a rich man. It ends with the man becoming very sad and going away because he realizes he cannot accept the Lord's invitation to follow him since it would require him to sell all he has and give it to the poor. Even the Lord's promise that he will then have treasure in heaven cannot persuade him to take this step.

The second part is the Lord's reflection on this man's situation. Jesus points out how hard it is for those who have many possessions to enter the kingdom of heaven. Indeed it is almost impossible for them to do so. It is like trying to push a camel through the eye of a needle. The disciples get his point and therefore say: "Then who can be saved?" And Jesus answers: "Humanly speaking it is impossible, but God can do the impossible." God will get the camel through the eye of the needle. God will save some rich people.

Then the third part follows. Peter says to Jesus: We have left everything to follow you. In Matthew's version of this story Peter also voices what is implied in his statement: "What we will get for

leaving everything to follow you?” Jesus answers by promising Peter and the others a hundredfold in this life and eternal life in the age to come. Mark is the only one who adds one negative to this abundant promise—and persecutions too, he says. But for Luke and Matthew all is simply positive. The rewards for their sacrifice will far outstrip anything they have left behind.

All three parts of our story circle around the same theme: wealth makes it hard for us to enter the Kingdom of God, and wealth cannot make us happy. The rich man goes away sad because he cannot separate himself from his wealth. (So you should be happy when you leave church freed by the two collections from that most important impediment to entering the Kingdom of God: money.)

Do we really believe what the Lord says here about wealth’s inability to make us happy? I suspect we don’t. We think money will solve our problems and therefore make us happy. Why shouldn’t we think that, we tell ourselves. It is our bills that make us worry. If we had enough money to pay all our bills and buy a few luxuries as well, we would be happy. Money also allows us to do so many good things. If we have money, we can send our children to the best colleges. If we don’t we can’t. So why shouldn’t we think that money can make us happy? But the man in

our story has enough money and he still feels that something is lacking in his life. That much we can imagine to be the case for some rich people. Money does not make them happy. What then will make them happy? Jesus offers himself and his way of living as a road to happiness. He promises them and us that if we are willing to follow him as closely as we can, we will find ourselves blessed, happy.

This story can teach us at least two things. First, it can teach us not to think that money will make us happy. We must look elsewhere for happiness. The way suggested here is the pursuit of the Kingdom of God. Second, it teaches us to be open to the possibility that the Lord Jesus may be calling us to a radical way of living, to a renunciation of wealth for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

That second point is why we have people in the Christian churches, and especially in our Catholic Church, who take a vow of poverty. But when this vow is lived in the context of a community, its clear identity can be lost, for the community provides well for its members.

But even those who do not take a vow of poverty can follow the Lord's invitation in this story if they live simply and seek their

happiness not in wealth but in the pursuit of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, given the ecological crisis in which we now exist, the Lord's warning about wealth as a detriment to the Kingdom of God is coming alive in a new way. We must live simply if we want to survive. There are life styles which contradict a Christian and ecological way of living and they are identical with the misconception that wealth brings happiness.

Perhaps we should put ourselves into this story. We could imagine ourselves to be the person in conversation with the Lord. We can tell him that we are doing our best to keep the commandments. What does the Lord now say to us? Does he look at us with love? Does he then add: "Come, follow me"? We all believe he does. Then we have to ask him, "Lord, how do we do that now?" What is the Lord's answer to us who live in a country where the division between the rich and the poor is getting bigger, not smaller, where affordable housing is still a problem for many people, and where thirteen thousand children are held in custody in tents in the desert, separated from their parents and families. Jesus' answer remains the same: Go, sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.

