



***Do you own  
wealth, or  
have you let  
wealth own  
you?***

I learnt many years ago in leadership training, I have been reminded recently in the seemingly endless press conferences for COVID, that questions are important. A question can often inform you more about the person asking the

question than the answer can teach you about the person answering the question. If, as scholars tell us, the Gospel of Mark was written as a training manual for new disciples, then one of the lessons was certainly about asking the right questions. Last week's Lectionary selection had the Pharisees asking a really bad question about divorce - a question loaded with male privilege and bias and legalism - and this week we get a similarly loaded question. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" If we weren't told later in the passage that this man had many possessions, the use of the word 'inherit' might have tipped us off. A man who has not needed to change or adapt or earn his wealth, he has inherited his wealth and now thinks that with some little sacrifice he can inherit eternal life from God. Like Tevye singing "*If I were a rich man*", here is someone who has so many possessions he has the luxury of sitting around and contemplating what he doesn't have - eternal life. Maybe I am being too harsh, because we are told that Jesus loves him, and maybe, by asking, "What must I do?", there is an earnest desire to be with God. However, the question clearly comes from a position of privilege, and not from the position of Jesus preaching, "Repent, turn yourself around and face up to God."

This story was obviously important to the Early Church because it's in three of the Gospels. And its effect is shown in the early chapters of Acts where all the followers of Jesus did exactly what he had instructed that man - they sold their possessions and shared the benefits in the community. However, just as obviously, it is a powerful and controversial story, particularly in prosperous communities and nations that feel the stare of Jesus in the story and the deep emotion of the man walking away. Surely Jesus can't mean us? We have been blessed with possessions, why would God want us to sell them all? That resistance has led to alternate interpretations to try to soften the extreme image of the camel trying to squeeze through the eye of a needle. Some claim that 'camel' is a mis-transcription because a very similar word - just one letter away - means the rope that is used on boats - it's not impossible to thread a rope in a needle, just difficult. Others claim that the 'eye of the needle' is the small postern or human gate that was the only way into Jerusalem after the main gate was closed at night - a camel could fit, just kneeling, and unloaded. Neither of these alternates have any real evidence, and neither of them really changes the impossibility that Jesus is picturing. An anchor rope cannot fit through a needle, and have you thought about how a camel's knees work? They can't move kneeling because the knees face opposite directions. And so, the story stays deeply uncomfortable for those of us with many possessions in a world filled with the poor and needy.

This is a powerful and confronting story because, despite Gospel passages such as these and the Wisdom books like Job, there remains a deep mythology in our culture that

wealth is, if not a sign of the blessing of God, at least a sign of our own moral and financial virtue. And poverty is a sign of laziness or incompetence, if not a punishment from God. That is the basis of the disciples' amazement at Jesus words about the impossibility of the rich entering the kingdom of God. And, despite stories like this one, and the Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor", that mythology about our physical and financial state in the world being directly attributed to blessing or cursing remains. And amazement, shading into offence, still strikes readers of this story - "Surely you don't mean me Lord?"

A clue to a deeper understanding of Jesus words lies in the often-misquoted words of Paul writing to Timothy - "the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil". Not money, not wealth or possessions, but our emotional connection to wealth and possessions. It will be impossible for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven, but what of someone who doesn't consider themselves rich, but rather blessed with resources to share. And there are plenty of examples of those in scripture. The women who followed Jesus and the disciples and kept them fed and housed. The men and women in Paul's journeys, like Lydia and Priscilla, who opened their houses and their purses to support the mission and ministry.

Compare the pair.

Jeff Bezos - the billionaire owner of Amazon is funding medical research into extending his life for as long as possible. He has placed his security and his very life in the hands of his wealth. A wealth that has accumulated through treating his employees as servants and wage slaves.

Sadio Mané - the Liverpool football player from Senegal who walks around with a cracked mobile phone because he sends the millions he is paid, home to Senegal to build a school and a stadium and provide clothes and food and income for the poor.

Do you own your possessions, or have you allowed your possessions to own you? Have you placed your security and future in your possessions, or is your security and future placed in God? Are your eyes on your treasures on earth dragging your heart with them, or are your eyes on the treasures of the kingdom lifting your heart in faith and love?

Jesus took that loaded question about inheriting eternal life and reframed it into, "Who must I follow, and how must I follow, to be welcomed into the kingdom of God?" We are called to follow Jesus - the One who gave all for God's will and our lives with God - and do that following by abandoning our reliance on externals like wealth and possessions and placing our faith and hope and love in our only good and only gracious God. Amen