

ORNC CHAPEL 13th October 2024 Trinity 20 Proper 23

Readings: Amos 5 vs 6-7, 10-15; Hebrews 4 vs 12–end; Mark 10 vs 17–31

Last week we saw the terrible impact of Hurricane Milton in Florida. We were also warned about hurricanes in the UK... In case you missed it, the BBC Weather app went haywire, and my phone told me that the wind speed in Greenwich on Thursday was 13,379 miles per hour. That might happen on the planet Jupiter but not here. The BBC also said that the England cricket team were 823 for 7. I thought that they must be having tech problems with numbers across the whole website. But it was true!

For the real hurricane, journalists reminded us of the Beaufort scale of Wind Speed, which ranges from 1 to 12, where 12 is 'hurricane force'. I say this just to introduce Sir Francis Beaufort, whose name is attached to the Wind Speed Scale. He was born in the 18th century, and became a Royal Navy hydrographer; he worked on Admiralty Charts for navigation at sea. (Sir Francis was shipwrecked at the age of 15 due to a faulty chart, and so deeply understood the importance of highly accurate Naval charts.)

This week, by coincidence, I came across a saying in the Royal Navy and associated with Sir Francis Beaufort - "*Trust in God and the Admiralty Chart!*" This reminded me of the image of our Christian journey as a kind of voyage through the choppy and sometimes stormy waters of life. (Yesterday even the Prime Minister spoke of the choppy waters of his first 100 days in office.) So I might rephrase "*Trust in God and the Admiralty Chart*" to say, "*Trust in God and the Scriptures*"... but with the proviso that we must always think carefully about what the Scriptures are saying. I say this because some Lectionary readings set for Sundays can be difficult to comprehend and apply to our lives. The Gospel today from Mark is one such reading. A rich man who says he wants to "gain" or "inherit" eternal life is told by Jesus to sell everything he has and give it to the poor.

This passage always gives me a frisson of anxiety. I am retired now but I had a well-paid good job, with a decent pension. (I didn't work for the Church of England.) So, to be honest, I'm looking for a loophole which means that, if I want to be a true follower of Jesus, I *don't* have to sell everything I own - especially my nice house - and give it all away. That doesn't sound like a good option to me, or anyone else in the modern world, I imagine. [Although, as someone reminded me after the service, those who join religious communities courageously give up all their worldly goods.]

So what do we make of this particular passage from the Gospels? Well, I *could* just say to you all this morning, "*OK everybody, we will be obedient to the Gospel: after the service, we will all go home and sell everything we have, and if you own property or land, put them on the market, and bring all the proceeds back to the Chapel, in a couple of weeks' time. I'll be here to help The Revd Robert receive the cash and cheques, and we will accept BACS transfers.*" But don't worry, because obviously I'm not going to stand up here and ask you to sell all you have.

However, the members of the early Church in the first and second centuries did exactly that - except for the cheques & BACS transfers. We are told in Acts chapter 4 vs 34 & 35 that '*as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and distribution was made to each as any had need.*'

I don't mean to be flippant about the Gospel reading today, but it is important not to gloss over how we might deal with this difficult passage. It's difficult for quite a few of us anyway, who have any money at all, to know how to deal with poverty and need, for example the homeless we pass by in the streets almost every day. In St Matthew chapter 5 v 42 Jesus says "*Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.*" But he also said in St Matthew 10 v 16, "*Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*"

Two weeks ago the Christian writer Mark Vernon wrote an article in the Church Times (published 27/9/24) entitled '*How to buy a place in heaven*'. His main thesis was that, for the early Church, the idea of sharing and giving money was closely bound up with spiritual values - giving to

the poor was a sign of a bridge between earth and heaven, what God wanted them to do. The rich man in the Gospel story therefore risked being separated from God spiritually, because his wealth was an obstacle that prevented him from following Jesus.

But how do we define wealth and poverty anyway? It must all be relative depending on where you live, and when you live. By some standards, we could say that no-one here this morning is in poverty. I say that because, worldwide, the United Nations defines poverty as a daily income of less than \$1.90 per day, about £1.50. Back in the first century, it is very likely that the vast majority of people had little or no accumulation of wealth. Even in the year 1800 it is estimated that 80% of the world's population lived in poverty, whereas in 2024 the figure is said to be 9%: so, 80% down to 9%: things do get better. Sort of. Unless you are in the 9%, with the suffering that entails, not to mention food insecurity and a much shorter average lifespan. However, here in the UK, one of the top five or six wealthy nations in the world, a recent report from The Joseph Rowntree Foundation stated that more than 1 in 5 people in the UK (22%) were in poverty in 2021/22 – 14.4 million people. They defined 'poverty' as individual or family income that was about £6000 to £12000 below what was needed to provide all the basic necessities for living. Unlike the first century, however, we pay taxes to provide a welfare state, so it is, in a way, our Chancellor Rachel Reeves' and the Government's problem. Even so, we should hope and pray and work for an end to poverty, both in the UK and around the world. It has been said that *"God has a heart for the poor."*

Returning to the Gospel, the wealthy man says to Jesus, *"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* This brings a strange, and for some people, a troubling response from Jesus, only found in St Mark's Gospel: *"Why do you call me good?"* I say 'troubling response' because it seems to go against Church doctrine. (Perhaps Jesus was challenging the man to think more carefully about what he was saying, i.e. casual phrases like 'Good Teacher' mean something.)

There then follows a brief exchange about what the man actually does in terms of obeying the commandments. Jesus summarised them. Of interest is that in his list of 'must-do' commandments, for this rich man, Jesus only mentions the ones that involve personal relationships; he completely omits the first four commandments that relate to loving and worshipping God, and keeping the Sabbath. So Jesus says - *"Do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness and do not defraud [also translated 'do not covet'] - and honour your father and mother."* When the modest rich man says, effectively, *"I have done all that!"* Jesus then tells him in a loving, but not critical, way *"You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."* Even the disciples, probably quite poor themselves, were shocked by the revelation that it is hard for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God. Camels going through eyes of needles was the response from Jesus' about the difficulty with which the rich enter the Kingdom. (It has been suggested that in order to get your camel, when laden with goods, through a particularly small and narrow gate in Jerusalem, you have to unload the camel. I'm not sure if that is true but it is a nice picture.)

It is also worth comparing today's Gospel story with the Good Samaritan parable. There in St Luke chapter 10 vv 25-37, we read *"...a lawyer stood up to put [Jesus] to the test. "Teacher," he asked, "what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"* In contrast to today's passage, Jesus approves of the lawyer's conclusion - to obey the first two commandments (but ignores the ones about personal relationships): *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself."* So if we compare these two passages we see that in St Luke the answer Jesus gives to the lawyer who asks how to gain eternal life was that he had to be the Good Neighbour: *"go and do likewise"*. In St Mark, however, the response of Jesus to the rich man was to tell him to sell all his possessions, give to the poor and follow him. There is obviously an overlap between the two stories, concerning care for others, but even so there is a difference in what Jesus says to the two questioners about eternal life. So I've always believed that the way in which we live our lives before God and how we follow Christ is between us and God, and no-one else's business. In my time, I've met too many people who delight in telling you what

they do in their Christian life, and by implication, what you should do too. To quote Bob Dylan, *'Everybody wants you... to be just like them.'*

Finally, (I always say 'finally' as it seems to lift the spirits of the congregation), and to cut to the elephant in the passage, if not the room - what is meant by gaining or inheriting eternal life anyway? And what is 'Treasure in Heaven'? Surely we have the free grace and complete salvation through Christ - so how do good works, including our handling of material goods, provide eternal life? I wouldn't be surprised if many Christians think that, in this passage, 'eternal life' and 'Treasure in Heaven' are about the afterlife and getting some kind of reward 'up there'. At the Reformation Martin Luther was very much against this idea of heavenly reward in exchange for good works, especially financial ones (in relation to time in Purgatory). People often mock Christians as they think we only do good so we have a better time in, as they see it, a fictional heaven. But the responses of Jesus are not about the afterlife as such. They are about this life when, like the first century Church, we can aim to connect earth and heaven by living generously and thoughtfully - especially with regard to what we have and how we use it. These are what we might call 'Kingdom values', and not means of salvation. So, eternal life is in the here and now, not just after we're dead.

If after this sermon you are still be worrying or puzzling about what God wants us as individuals to do with our possessions and homes, remember this: when the shocked disciples say, *"But who then can be saved?"* we read that wonderful line from Jesus, *"With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God."* In life's voyage, including the choppy waters and storms, remember the Royal Navy saying associated with Sir Francis Beaufort, *'Trust in God and the Admiralty Chart'*, that is, the Scriptures; but make sure you understand what they are saying to you personally. And that is no one else's business except yours, in your relationship with God.

I'll close with a verse from the Hebrews reading, which reminds us of how we are helped and guided by God through his Holy Spirit, as we ponder the Scriptures: *'Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.'*

Amen.