

## WHAT MUST I DO?

Pentecost 21 Year B

Job 23:1-9,16-17; Ps 22:1-15; Heb 4:12-16; Mk 10:17-31

Gladstone 14/10/2018

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Recently, we went, as many have done in recent months, to visit our tax accountant, to do all our tax returns. Along with the usual discussions about income, expenditure, depreciation and other tax deductible expenses, another item of discussion gained some prominence this year—retirement. Technically, I have only four years to go until retirement (Yes, I know I don't look nearly old enough to be thinking about retirement, but what can I say—I hold my age well. Ahem!).

Anyway, I reckon it's never too early to start planning your retirement. And there's a lot to think about, isn't there—looking at where're you going to live, if you need to move, as we will, appropriate investments for your hard earned superannuation, the pension, sponging off rich siblings, winning lotto—all the usual things—trying to work out a way in which you are able to live out the autumn years of your life in a manner to which you would like to be accustomed, but probably never actually achieved before then—and as truth be known, probably never will.

Be that as it may, our reading from Mark's account of the gospel, this morning, about the rich young ruler, has something to say about that—albeit in a somewhat more spiritual sense. Although, I'm sure he was trying to be very pragmatic about it.

Not long after Jesus had been quizzed by some Pharisees and had then blessed the little children; Jesus begins to set off once again. John tells us that: "As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? (v.17). Now, you have to give him credit for getting straight to the point, don't you? Top marks there. There was no mucking about. Obviously, this question had been playing on his mind for while, and he needed an answer: "...what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

This seemingly elusive prize that he seeks—eternal life—is mentioned frequently in the Gospel of John. In the other three gospel accounts, outside of this story (which is also found in Matthew 19:16-30 and Luke 18:18-30), the phrase "eternal life" appears only twice (Matthew 25:46; Luke 10:25). The more usual phrase in these other gospel accounts is "the kingdom of God"—a phrase, which Jesus uses a little later in this passage, in verses 24-25. In verse 26, the disciples use the word "saved" instead of "eternal life" or "kingdom of God."

And so, the man asks what he must do to *inherit* eternal life. As a rich man, he understands inheritances. The law spells out inheritances. The firstborn son is to inherit two shares of the property, and each of the other sons is to inherit one share (Deuteronomy 21:17). In other words, the firstborn son is to get twice as much as any of his brothers. Probably wouldn't go down too well these days. If there are no sons, daughters are allowed to receive the inheritance (Numbers 27:8-11). However, in most cases, a daughter would receive only a dowry—a bridal present from her father.

This rich young man surely knows those laws like the back of his hand. Now he wants to know the law regarding eternal life—what he must do to inherit eternal life. What are the requirements? What must he do?

A few years ago when Dottie and I purchased an investment property, which may end up being our retirement home—you know, the one you go to before that “final” retirement home, from which there is no return—one of my daughters asked me what you have to *do* to be able to afford to purchase a home, like that. My answer: You have to wait until your parents die. Her response was: Oh!

The pivotal word that surrounds this exchange between the rich young ruler and Jesus, and around which Jesus' teaching turns, is the word “do.” “What must I “do?” because, the bottom line is that eternal life cannot be won by “doing.” Spiritual life is not a matter of bookkeeping. If spiritual life was all about “doing,” then we don't need Jesus—we don't need God's grace and forgiveness—we don't need anyone but ourselves, and good old honest had work.

If the man's answer in verse 20—that he has kept all the commandments from his youth—is correct, as may well be the case, he's already doing the right things—but for the wrong reasons. As one biblical commenter states, “His obedience is based on calculations of self-interest rather than on a single-hearted love of God which is prepared to fling everything away” (Hooker, 242). In other words, he is less interested in serving God than in figuring out how to get God to serve him. And isn't that the way of many in the church who see God as more of a divine supermarket for blessing.

There is no doubt that God is generous, and that God has certainly been generous to this young man. He now wants to know how to insure God's continued generosity. He is rich in this life, and wants to extend his prosperity into eternity. His answer, that he has kept all the commandments, shows that he knows the traditional answer to his question and is already complying with traditional requirements. Perhaps he's anxious to insure that he hasn't failed at some unknown point. Perhaps he's looking for some kind of

reassurance. Perhaps he's just looking for a pat on the back—"Well done, young man. Keep up the good work!"

But perhaps also, he has some idea that that's *not* enough—that there *is* something else he's missing." In any event, we can be sure that he does not expect Jesus to lay a significant new requirement on him.

Then John writes, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." (21-22)

What a tragic scene. You can see here the longing in Jesus' heart for this young man. He didn't come to Jesus, as so many powerful men did, trying to find a chink in Jesus' armour. He asked a question so that he could learn from Jesus, and anticipated that he would do whatever Jesus told him to do.

Jesus saw that the man's heart was pure and felt a genuine affection for him. Whether he knew in advance how the man would respond is something that we can't know, but whether he did or not, he was giving this young man a genuine opportunity to choose the road that leads to life.

When Jesus had rattled off some of the commandments earlier—the ones that related to relationships—the ones the man said he had kept since his youth—notice that Jesus left off the very last one: You shall not covet. And here we find the chink in the young man's armour, for, we are told, "he had many possessions," and obviously did not want to give them up.

"How profoundly ironic is the kingdom of God. The children in the former story who possess nothing are not told that they lack anything, but rather that the kingdom of God is theirs; yet this man who possesses everything still lacks something! Only when he sells all he has—only when he becomes like a vulnerable child—will he possess everything" (Edwards, 312).

This is a shocking call to discipleship—especially shocking in a culture that assumed that riches constituted an endorsement by God of the rich person's life. This man has probably gone through his life believing that he has tried to please God and that his riches demonstrate that God is pleased with him.

This call is also shocking when you contrast it with other calls to discipleship you find in the Gospels. In most cases, Jesus called people by simply saying, “Follow me,” without any other demands on their life.

Then Jesus hammers the nail right in. Talking now to his disciples, he says: “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!...It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Once again, Jesus turns conventional wisdom on its head. Using exaggerated language, Jesus makes his point. He talks of the largest animal trying to negotiate the smallest opening to provide a memorable illustration of the impossibility of a rich person entering the kingdom of God. That’s not to say that a rich person can’t get into heaven. They can. It’s just that their riches can’t get them there.

The key to understanding this passage is then found in verse 27. “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Inheriting eternal life, entering the kingdom, and being saved are impossible for any human being, but not for God. God is good and desires the salvation of all. Therefore all must depend entirely upon God. Only absolute trust in God makes possible a life of faithful discipleship.

Apart from grace, this decent, God-fearing, law-abiding man has no hope. Only by God’s grace is there any possibility that he can enter the kingdom of God. The same is true for all of us. Our challenge is to accept our status as little children before God, penniless and hopeless except for God’s grace. Neither perfect attendance in worship—nor service in church office—nor ordination—nor tithing—nor anything that we can do can save us apart from the grace of God.

<sup>28</sup> Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” <sup>29</sup> Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, <sup>30</sup> who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. <sup>31</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

In the kingdom of God, the person who loves God will be first, and the person who loves money will be last. The person who takes care of an ailing neighbour will be first, and the person who takes care of Number One will be last.

To God our Saviour, be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.