

Pentecost + 19
15/10/2006

Mark the Evangelist

Job 23:1 - 9, 16 - 17
Psalm 22
Hebrews 4:12 - 16
Mark 10:17 - 31

...treasure in heaven...

The idea that godliness and prosperity go together is a common biblical thought. Job's story is one which tests the hypothesis that a righteous man who is prosperous will forsake his faith if he loses his wealth and well being. Chapter 23 is a response to Eliphaz, one of Job's friends, who says we receive from God what we deserve, and Job's suffering must be a consequence of some fault on his part. But Job knows he is blameless. He would challenge God over his fate, but he cannot find God in order to present his case. Job's *Oh that I might find him...* expresses the frustration of faithful men and women who, in suffering pain and loss, have passed through the dark night of the soul. In Job's case he does not reject God, even though he does not understand his pain, and becomes terrified of God. He seems to wish that he could be absorbed in the cloud of obscurity that hides God from his eyes, but the Hebrew version of what he says, reveals he has a persisting hope: *Yet I am not reduced to silence by the darkness, or by the mystery which hides him* REB. Job was able to allow God to be God for him when there is no apparent reason to do so. In the end his philosophical friends are the ones whose faith and thought is not deep enough to match the situation. Job shows us that while God is a mystery not easily deciphered, full understanding lies in the realm of faith and trust.

The Gospel is a story about a righteous and prosperous man seeking a deeper grip on faith. We know the questions: *Can a camel go through the eye of a needle; and a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven?* The explanations from Sunday School days about the low gate at Jerusalem, and the link between the word for camel and rope make no difference. In the end we are confronted with an impossible possibility. One clue to the meaning may be in what Jesus later says: *children how hard it is to enter the kingdom of heaven...* The reference to children seems like a slip; just one word amongst many in this long reading. But it is one of three occasions when Mark refers to *children* and it links this story with two others we have heard recently. On both occasions, the quest for power amongst the disciples and the controversy over divorce, the appearance of children becomes an acted parable, which demonstrates what it means to live for God. The children had nothing: no rights, no claims, no power no wealth. Their hearts were open and receptive, unlike those who struggled for power, and challenged Jesus. The children readily expressed trust. Their gift was to receive the blessing of God, a sign of treasure in heaven.

The rich man is devout, sincere and prosperous and his wealth would have been regarded as a sign of God's blessing. We could easily imagine him as a faithful Protestant who believed in God and the work ethic. He has lived justly and kept all the commandments that affected his relationships to his neighbour. Still he feels a need for something more. The challenge put before him is this: what will he trust for his ultimate security? Jesus was not being mean when he put the challenge. His request

came as a warm hearted, loving offer of life. It exposed the fact that the man is actually possessed by his possessions, a discovery that appalled him, and he left in shock. What Jesus asked of him must have seemed life denying in the extreme. The disciples are likewise astounded at the teaching. The rich man may have felt as if he had been exposed to a penetrating, two-edged sword, such as pictured in Hebrews. This was discernment at its sharpest, and he who sought to be fully united with God is instead separated from the gift. Hebrews and Mark both witness that in Jesus Christ we are offered the chance to find our ultimate security in fellowship with God. That is what it means to have treasure in heaven. This is what it means to become rich in the deepest sense of the word. And that is what it means in some sense, to transcend our suffering.

Christian tradition has approached the challenge of discipleship in two ways. Through the way of renunciation, and the way of affirmation. The way of renunciation has striven to retain affection only for God. People like St Anthony (270 AD) heard a priest read out the text: "Go sell all you have, give it to the poor and come follow me" and did just that, and became a Desert Father. To the present day people have entered monastic life on this basis. Others, like the Quakers, have taken a moderate stance. They held to the principle of owning worldly goods, but keeping them in freedom. Quakers refused to allow "encumbrances" to control their lives. The way of affirmation has been to rejoice in our relationships and the material things of life, and to aim to use them for the glory of God, without allowing them to become idols.

We are not saved by giving up our goods, or by accumulating more of them. We are saved by the miracle of God's gracious mercy, shown to us in Jesus who reached out lovingly to the rich man, calling him to place his life in God hands. There is nothing wrong with being wealthy, but spiritual danger does lurk around possessions. Jesus' challenge to find our real security in God opens up new pathways to daring, active, self-risking faith, beyond the conventional boundaries of morality and prosperity. Being able to find our ultimate security in God leaves us free to be poor, or rich, for the sake of the kingdom.

In recent times we have seen two of the wealthiest men in the world, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett divest themselves of vast fortunes for the sake of the underprivileged in the world. They have shown that, to some extent, they are not possessed by their possessions, and have a degree of freedom. And this week we have seen the Nobel Prize awarded to Muhammad Yunus who created the Grameen Bank for the poor. He faced the fact that the poor can't live on nothing and created a way to generate material support for them.

But the bottom line here is about more than wealth. It is about where we seek our ultimate security. Recently Oxfam published the results of a survey of military spending in the world. Shockingly it was revealed that global military spending has passed the record set at the height of the Cold War (AU \$1.41 trillion). The figures reflect some people's search for vast wealth. But mostly they reveal how scared people are of their neighbours, and what we think we need to be safe and secure, as recent events in Korea show yet again. The reality is what we most need is the opposite of what we seek.

Faced as we are with the prospect of another nuclear arms race, it may be time to consider thorium. If you find *Cosmos Magazine* on the Internet and look up thorium,

you will discover that there is an available plentiful source of a clean form of nuclear power that does not create the problems associated with waste. It would be a much better option for the world to use, but it does not have the weapons capability that holds our leaders in thrall. Our quest to have power over others causes us to engage in things that are destructive, life denying and corrosive of trust and relationship in the world, and we need to find another way.

Mark tells us Jesus Christ comes out to meet us with the offer of the richest treasure there is, which is not about wealth or power. The downside of this offer is that it challenges everything we hold to be important in life, and that can be truly shocking. But this offer comes from one who looks on us in love, and wills that we should be freed from everything that holds us in servitude. Freed to enjoy the inheritance God has given us in the world, and freed to build for the future in the light of God's gift. There isn't a better offer to be had than that.