

14 October 2018

Amos 5.6-7, 10-15

Mark 10.17-31

Money in the Way

Money, sex and power – these are the themes of the readings from Mark 10 over the first three weeks of October.

Last week we looked at Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce, and explored the theme of sexual ethics.

This week we have the story of a wealthy man and his painful encounter with Jesus – and so we have to explore the whole area of money and wealth.

And next week we will be into the whole question of power.

In exploring the implications of this story for our walk with God I want to pick up on a number of the verbal signals that Mark has used in his telling of this story. Mark's choice of words is significant.

- there are some phrases and words that only appear in this story in Mark's gospel
- there's an unexpected word thrown in at one point
- and there are some ordinary looking words that always have added meaning for Mark

And I don't think this is accidental. I think that Mark wants this story to stand out for us, and he makes it stand out by his choice of words.

Indeed the whole story begins with a debate about words – or at least a single word – the word 'good'. And I wonder whether Mark is using this as a kind of pointer to us – words are important ... think about the words you are using, the words I am using ...

The man's first words to Jesus are, 'Good teacher' ... and Jesus makes this polite form of address a form of debate.

"Why do you call me good? No one is good except God."

I suspect this was not the kind of reply the man had anticipated.

One interesting suggestion is that Jesus here is refusing to get caught up in the game of compliments that was played by the rich and the elite in the society of his time.

In greeting someone you would throw in a compliment ... but only in the expectation that that person would then respond with a similar compliment in response. It was a way of acknowledging honour, but also of asserting your own entitlement to honour.

And Jesus just refuses to get involved in any of those kind of games.

“It’s not my goodness, or indeed your goodness that matters here, it is God’s goodness.”

But actually, this is the question that underlies this whole story. What does God’s goodness look like, and what does it mean to seek God’s goodness?

It is the question that the prophet Amos asked in the 8th century BC. His charge to the society of his time:

The people were enthusiastically ‘seeking God’ in terms of looking for some kind of spiritual experience, but they were living in and supporting an unjust society in which the poor were trampled on and cheated.

If they were to seek God, then they have to:

“Seek good, not evil,
that you may live.”

And God’s goodness was all about concern for the poor and the promotion of justice.

So here is our first word that is significant. What does it mean to be good? What does God’s goodness look like?

This man thought he knew what God’s goodness looks like. He probably believed that he was living the model of ‘the good life’.

And his disciples looking on and listening in thought they knew as well. But when Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God,”

There was an assumption that anyone who looked basically 'good', and was rich, was rich because they had been blessed by God. So if the rich couldn't enter the kingdom of God, then who could?

- they were forced to think again.

The next phrase is the phrase 'eternal life'.

Were you aware that the only two times that this phrase is used in Mark's gospel is at the beginning and end of this story?

The man asks, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

And at the end of the episode, Jesus assures his disciples that, because of all that they have left behind, they will 'receive a hundred times as much in this present age ... and in the age to come, eternal life.' (v 30)

It is as if it is only this man who is interested in this particular question – the question of inheriting eternal life.

We could understand this man's interest in eternal life in more than one way.

On the one hand we could be generous to him and say that here is a man who seems to have everything in life – he has lived an upright, law-abiding life, and he is comfortably off – and yet he appears to be aware that there is still something lacking in his life. Despite everything that he has going for him, he knows that there is a hole in his life, an emptiness that needs filling.

So we might feel sympathetic towards him ... he has at least recognised an important lesson – material wealth is not true wealth.

That's a generous view.

A less generous view would be to note how odd it is that it is only a rich person who asks Jesus a question about eternal life. Almost as if, he is the only person who has the luxury to ask a question about life in the age to come. As far as he is concerned he's got everything in this life all buttoned up. This life is sorted ... now I can start thinking about the next life.

So is it so his credit that he is asking this question? Or is it almost a symptom of his self-obsession? That there is a kind of self-centredness in his desire to see himself OK in the next life?

I don't think it is altogether a coincidence that the version of the Christian gospel that has emerged in the relatively rich and affluent west is a version of the gospel that has tended to focus on what happens to us when we die – sorting out our eternal destiny.

Nor is it a coincidence that during the second half of the last century it was theologians from the two thirds world – the world's poorest nations - who have reminded us through liberation theology that the gospel is about far more than just our eternal relationship with God – it is about our relationship with God here and now, worked out in the way in which we respond to the poor of our world. They have reminded us that if we only focus on questions of 'eternal life' (what happens to us when we die) – we actually exclude the concerns that are to the fore in much of the bible.

Now Jesus doesn't discourage his followers from holding out a hope of eternal life in the age to come ... but he does discourage an interest in eternal life if that interest in eternal life is at the expense of creating a disconnect between our relationship with God and our life and action in this world ... and in particular the impact of our life and action on the poor of our world.

That was the disconnect that the prophets consistently pointed out between the apparent spiritual enthusiasm of the people, and their daily conduct in creating a just and fair society that cared for those at the bottom of the pile.

This man's question is certainly a valid question ... but it also may be an indication that he has begun to lose his sense of what is really important. I think there is a bit of a warning here. If all of our attention is on eternal life – on life in the age to come – have we lost our focus on what God cares about in the here and now?

The third word that stands out in this story is a word that Jesus slips into his quoting of the ten commandments.

Jesus says to him, "You know the commandments:

- do not murder

- do not commit adultery
- do not steal
- do not give false testimony
- do not defraud
- honour your father and mother

Hold on! Where did that bit about 'Do not defraud' come from?

You read either version of the ten commandments and you won't read those words! Jesus has slipped this in as an added aside!

This can't be an accident!

There has to be a fairly strong hint here that Jesus wants this man to look pretty closely at the kind of financial relationships that he is involved in. Perhaps Jesus was, by implication, pointing to injustices that were written into the accepted relationships between wealthy landowners and their tenant farmers and clients.

It was probably pretty near impossible to deal and trade in the market of that time, and not to end up exploiting, cheating or disempowering those lower down the economic food chain. This was the way things worked.

He might not have been breaking any laws, but he still might be implicated in practices that effectively defrauded people out of what was rightfully theirs.

But the man is unaware of having stepped outside God's demands on his life expressed in these terms ...

So what is this?

- Is it arrogance?
- or a total lack of self-awareness?
- or a mind-set that discounts certain flaws because they are 'trivial', or they 'don't count' ... or 'everyone does that'?

Whatever it was, it is interesting that Jesus doesn't argue with him, because Jesus has seen something in this man's heart that is holding him back from a living relationship with God – something that goes far beyond the question of whether or not it is true that he has managed to keep all of the commandments throughout his life.

And so we come to the next phrase that stands out:

“Jesus looked at him and loved him.”

There are two things that are interesting about this phrase:

1. ‘Jesus looked at him’ - Whenever Mark tells us that Jesus ‘looked’ at anyone, it is always in the context of Jesus seeing what’s under the surface. It is always much more to do with ‘insight’ than with ‘sight’.

Jesus sees what is in the heart of this man – what makes him tick – what drives him.

This man may be able to kid himself that he’s OK with God ... but Jesus sees what’s under the surface.

We need to be brave enough to allow our lives to come under the scrutiny of Jesus ... and to hear what Jesus has to say about what is going on within us.

2. ‘... and loved him.’ It might sound remarkable, but this, again, is the only time in Mark’s gospel that Mark tells us that Jesus loved anybody!

On a couple of occasions we are told that he has compassion on the crowds that are gathered around him.

But nowhere else does Mark use this word ‘love’ to describe Jesus’ concern for anyone.

It is as if, in all of the other incidents, Mark doesn’t need to tell us ... it is obvious by the actions of Jesus that he reaches out to people with care, compassion and concern – he touches the leper, he heals the sick, he welcomes the outsider.

But in this story it needs to be stated clearly.

What Jesus says, he says, not out of malice, not out of jealousy, not because he has got a hang-up about rich people, not because he is

following a political ideology but because he loves this man, and wants the very best for him, and can see exactly what it would take to liberate this man from his captivity to wealth.

And what is Jesus' loving assessment? It is that this man needs to be liberated from the wealth that has got a grip on his heart:

“Sell your possessions, give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me.”

And so to the final phrase that stands out:

“At this the man's face fell.”

And again, this is the only time that Mark gives a description of anyone's facial expression.

Mark's story-telling is extremely economical in style. He just doesn't go in for descriptions of people's emotional response to Jesus ... except on this occasion, when the man's emotions say it all ...

“He went away sad, because he had great wealth.”

All sorts of other people were able to respond to Jesus' invitation – fishermen, tax collectors, blind beggars they all also had to give up everything to follow – homes, families, jobs ...

... but that sort of response was beyond this man because of his attachment to his wealth.

We don't actually know which bit of Jesus' challenge was too much for this man. Jesus said 'One thing is necessary', but actually the challenge had three parts:

- sell your possessions
- give to the poor
- come follow me

Living the Jesus' way always has these three components

- letting go of all other priorities

- living with a servant heart – a focus on those at the bottom and on the outside
- centring our lives on Jesus

But for this man the gravitational pull of wealth and money was just too great. He was unable to break free from its orbit.

Gospel Reflection (inspired by Mark 10: 17-22)

One idolised wealth, another hungered for fame,
so they went sadly away.

One loved career, one the latest fashion,
and they went proudly away.

One lived through her children, one lived for his farm,
so they went busily away.

One fed on the adulation of fans, sport was another's passion,
so they went impatiently away.

One had the gambling lust, another's was sex,
so they went madly away.

One wanted to be waited on, one wanted to lie about,
so they went sluggishly away.

One was hooked on sport, one on the next drug fix,
so they went hurriedly away.

One lived for churchly honours, one for churchly clout,
so they went blindly away.

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