

The Rich Young Man, Judgement and Mercy

Hebrews 4.12-16 & Mark 10.17-31

Please do sit down and relax a little, after two of the most vivid, immediate and disturbing of New Testament readings.

The camel and the eye of a needle. Thirty or forty years ago, I remember a friend at St Mark's church in Wimbledon, exclaiming to me after hearing this Gospel reading. "Oh God, I hate that reading" she said. I hope and believe in honest if unusually phrased prayer, rather than in blasphemy. And really, I don't think that it is an unreasonable reaction. Even Jesus' disciples seem to have been startled – 'then who *can* be saved' they mutter to each other. Obeying all the commandments is clearly not nearly enough.

We too have good reason to be startled. Not just those of us who "have many possessions" but all of us here in this congregation, are likely to have wealth and good fortune beyond the imagining of Jesus' listeners. We are so lucky to be living in one of those liberal democracies where we have a buffer against almost all the serious ills of poverty, and generally live in warm and sheltered homes. But very few of us up sticks and sell all our possessions, to serve Jesus with our whole lives devoted to service and mission – sharing all we have with those on the margins of society.

The reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews is not much more comfortable. Who wants to be pierced with a two edged sword, so separated into our component parts that our very thoughts and intentions are laid bare, all ready for judgement? It will not be easy, or even possible, to render an adequate account of our failings.

It is all the more important then, not to lose sight of the second half of each reading, nor to the context in which they were written.

Jesus' reply to the disciples is clear – mortals *can't* enter the Kingdom of God by their own actions. But for God nothing is impossible. And He goes on to acknowledge that the disciples, who really did leave everything to follow Jesus, can expect eternal life, albeit after persecution in this world.

St Paul has told us that there are many gifts of the Spirit, and people may be called to service in many ways – not just through extreme generosity or mission work. Not all of Jesus' close friends left their homes and families to follow Him. Some of Jesus' friends lived a settled life in houses where they were well off enough to provide good meals for guests. For example, Lazarus, who Jesus' loved well enough to raise from the dead, lived with his two sisters Mary and Martha. When Jesus arrived on a visit, Martha was run off her feet trying to provide the best possible meal for her friend and Lord, but there was no suggestion that there was any risk of running short of the raw materials for dinner.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews, writing some time after Jesus' death and resurrection, was able to put some thought into this conundrum – that none of us is worthy of eternal life, but all of us can be saved by the actions and will of God. Specifically "we have a great high priest, Jesus the Son of God" who has gone through the same human life as we have, and is in a position to sympathise with all our weaknesses. He has been tested just as we are, and can understand how difficult it is.

So let's hold on to our convictions of faith, and approach our end with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find the grace to help us in our time of need.

May the Lord grant us all that mercy and grace,

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.