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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon :
October 14, 2018 ~ “Twentieth Sunday of Trinity”

In my 40 years of ministry I have only twice preached in a cathedral. Once was in 1988 when I worked in Epsom and was invited to preach in Guildford Cathedral and the second occasion was 3 years ago when I was invited to preach at St Albans Cathedral, one of the so-called perks of being an Honorary Canon as I was then. I can't remember much about my experience 30 years ago but I do remember more clearly my experience at St Albans. I was fairly relaxed until the clergy procession met up with the cathedral choir; it was then that my fears substantially increased. I looked at the boys and men of the cathedral choir and wondered to myself – just how many sermons have they heard or endured? Did they all play sermon cricket between them, marking an imaginary score-card when the preacher mentioned certain words – or, even worse, would they mentally give me points out of 10, a la Strictly Come Dancing. In fact, when it came to it, the choir were all sitting behind me so I couldn't anyway see what they were doing or thinking – thankfully; and at the end they all disappeared to disrobe so no reactions there then.

But the congregation who filed out were a little different. A few were complimentary. Most said nothing but did at least smile. Some said nothing and did not smile. Then one lady came up to me and, thanking me for my sermon, said I had pitched just the right note and she was going off to do something about it. That was all she said. It was obvious that something I said had encouraged her to take some action – she wasn't specific and I was none the wiser – but such is the nature of Cathedral congregations, where spontaneous conversations often happen without the end result being known.

I thought about that encounter when I was reading through today's Gospel about the rich young man. The young man is very keen, you can say that about him. He comes running up to Jesus, wanting to know how he can inherit eternal life. It is typical of Jesus that he doesn't answer him directly but picks up his definition of the word 'good'. The young man has already seen the goodness in this preacher, and Jesus helps him further in his thinking, to look at what God's ideas of goodness are, and where that challenges the young man's life. When the young man moves away,

crestfallen, it isn't that he disagrees with Jesus – no, it has just dawned on him that this Jesus is actually right.

Like the young man, we who seek will find Jesus challenging us, and then we have to choose whether to go on with the search – or press the cancel button. For the words of the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews is also spot on – the word of God is living and active – and we have to respond – or not. If we had used the set Old Testament reading for today from Amos, we would have read Amos was encouraging his readers to seek good, seek God; love good, love God, 'that you may live'.

But to go back to Mark. As usual, Mark tells it as it is and pulls no punches. For after the young man leaves with his face downcast, Jesus uses an absurd image about who might enter the kingdom of God – with the disciples looking at their camels and then looking at a needle and thinking 'the boss has definitely lost it this time'. But Jesus reminds them of something they might easily forget – that 'all things are possible with God'. So it falls to headstrong Peter to blurt out what the other disciples are probably all thinking. You can almost hear the angry resentment welling up in his voice: 'We have left everything to follow you' and the clear response of Jesus that 'many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first'. That is an end to it.

But of course it is not an end to it. Because that doesn't sit right with society at large. It's not how human beings are made to function. If you are at the head of a queue, you expect to be admitted first. That's plain common sense. Anything else is surely unfair.

But God is very good at turning things – and people – on their head. For example, it is certainly not uncommon for someone to come to faith late in their life, suddenly to discover that the word of God is living and active, to realise there is a point to religion, and they want to do something about it. It is why quite a number of adults often think about the possibility of confirmation. When I was younger it was always a sort of rite of passage that those in their early teens did. Not any longer. And we should be delighted that adults of all ages can suddenly hear God saying to them – why not you? Why don't you think about being baptised, being confirmed, even at your age?

One person who did that was a lady in my last parish called Beryl. She had not had an easy life. One of her sons had died at a young age and she and her husband never really got over that. Then in 2004 her husband died – and that was when I conducted

his funeral and met her. So she started to come to church – and in 2005, 75 years after her baptism she did something about it and was confirmed by the Bishop. Although she was to suffer ill health over the years until her death, she never fell out of love with God or the church from that day on – a relationship which began late in her life. So it is never too late for someone to understand the point of religion and do something about it.

I want to finish by quoting a letter I read this week in the Radio Times – admittedly not a particularly noted theological journal. There had been a previous article about the negative view of religion as portrayed in soaps and this letter writer mentioned that the receptionist in the daytime soap Doctors, Mrs Tembe (sorry I don't watch it) said this about the purpose of religion: "Most people live empty lives. They have nothing to believe in. They have become selfish, self-obsessed and greedy. They have forgotten how to care for one another, and religion fills that gap. It gives people an anchor to hold onto in times of crisis and doubt. It gives people certainty over their purpose and connects them with all they have lost, with humanity. How can you say that religion has no purpose?"

Remember Mark's story of the young rich man – who might well have seen the point of religion later on in his life? Remember Beryl and her coming to faith in older age. Above be greatly encouraged to remember that, with God, all things are possible.