

Pentecost 19B
Mark 10:17-31
11 October 2009
Christ Church

Let me tell you a story.

There was once a poor man who used to pray to God for a treasure that would make him rich. One night in a dream he heard a voice which said to him, “Tomorrow a monk will pass by your home, asking for food. He has the treasure you seek. Ask him for it.”

The next day a monk knocked on his door and asked for something to eat. Remembering his dream, the man said to the monk, “Last night I heard a voice in my dream which told me that a holy man would pass by my house today and ask for something to eat and that he carried the very treasure I have longed for, for so long. The voice told me to ask you for it, so give me the treasure now that will make me wealthy.”

The monk fished in the pocket of his habit and brought out the brightest, largest diamond you could imagine: the biggest in the world. “Is this the treasure you speak of? I found it in the forest. Here, take it.” The man seized the diamond jubilantly while the monk finished his food and then continues on his way.

That night the man could not sleep at all for fear of losing his brand new treasure. “This house is not safe,” he thought to himself. “Anyone could break in and steal the diamond and I can’t secure the house as I don’t have the money to do that. Perhaps I should simply sell the jewel, but as everyone here is so very poor, who would have the money to buy it from me? And if I were to travel to somewhere else, maybe I might get robbed on my way there.”

In today’s Gospel, a rich man comes to Jesus and asks how he might attain the Kingdom of Heaven. He truly wants to follow Jesus. He is a keeper of the Law, and unlike others

who approach Jesus, this rich man isn't trying to trick him.

The rich man sincerely wants to follow The Way.

When Jesus instructs him to sell all that he has and then come and follow, the rich man is deeply saddened. He cannot imagine letting go of the security and prestige that he has attained in the village. Following Jesus costs too much. The rich man goes away dejected.

Jesus uses this event to instruct the disciples about how difficult it is to be a disciple – more difficult than shoving a camel through the eye of a needle – an image so preposterous that it's funny to imagine it. Of course, the disciples aren't amused; Jesus seems to have set the bar impossibly high. You can imagine them squirming as they ask, "Who then, can be saved?"

Not long ago, I overheard two men discussing the Bible. One of these men is an Episcopalian who has great reverence for the Word of God and respects its authority. The other man

also reveres and respects God's Word, but his approach is to view every word and every Biblical metaphor literally.

As I listened, the Episcopalian challenged his friend: "It always amazes me that your tradition can emphasize literal inerrancy when addressing some issues, but not when it comes to passages like today's, 'the camel through the eye of the needle.' Why is that? Why aren't you as passionate about this passage, and why don't more fundamentalist Christians renounce whatever material wealth they have?"

I will admit to you that this passage of Scripture has haunted me many times through the years – so much so that I brought it up to my spiritual director on my recent retreat. I was thinking of the pictures that our Global Outreach Forum presented a few weeks ago -- the pictures of so many Haitian children and their parents living in deep poverty.

After meeting Pere Kerwin and his dear family, it was impossible not to notice the dramatic contrast with my own material existence. Compared with these people, I enjoy

extraordinary number of creature comforts. Every time I think of this, it makes me feel guilty. I presented all of this to my spiritual director, wondering if I am being called to do what the rich man in the story is called to do: sell everything I own and give it to the poor.

My spiritual teacher pointed out that not everyone in the story of redemption in Christ lives in poverty. She pointed to the woman, Lydia, in the Acts of the Apostles, a dealer in purple cloth, the cloth of royalty. Lydia was not required to give away her business and her financial resources. Instead, Jesus' followers benefited from her great generosity. Lydia has a different role to play in the Christian narrative.

Jesus may not be asking everyone, literally, to do as he instructs the rich man. Jesus knew this man's heart, and he understood that this man was much attached to his material wealth. If the rich man wanted to embrace the ministry of Jesus, he couldn't take it with him, so to speak. Mark's Gospel

makes it clear that following the Way of Christ requires sacrifice – being Christian is not meant to be an easy path.

What does this mean for each of us? Jesus calls us to ask ourselves this question every day.

Some of us may be more like Lydia. We have responsibilities in our families, our places of business, our communities, and in our church. Many of us are gifted with many financial resources. God calls us to manage them responsibly and use them for God's good purposes. When we take our call to discipleship in Christ seriously, when we seek the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom rich in God's glory, we open our hands, our hearts, and our monetary resources to help those ministries that make Christ known and felt in all of the world: whether it is our children and elders, the poor who are our neighbors, or the poor across the sea. This is *our* call.

Let me take you back to my opening story.

The next morning, bright and early, the man who had been given the diamond quickly made his way down the hill where he had seen the monk disappearing. He ran along the road for hours, looking for the monk how had given him the diamond. He finally found him, sitting peacefully under a tree, serenely contemplating the Nature all around him with an expression of absolute benediction and stillness. “I’ve come to return your diamond,” gasped the man. “I have realized that this is not the treasure I seek at all. What I truly need is the treasure you carry inside yourself – the inner peace that allows you to give away this precious diamond.”