

Sermon 13 October 2024 - by Justin Tivey

I'm going to speak this morning about the Gospel reading, the well-known story set out in Mark's Gospel, chapter 10, verses 17 to 31. And the impossibility of camels passing through the eyes of needles and rich people entering the kingdom of heaven.

In many ways this is not an easy piece of scripture to analyse as the results can rapidly become uncomfortable for us to deal with. When I first looked at the reading to prepare for today I wondered whether Vicar Simon had cleverly suggested that the lawyer in the congregation should address this difficult topic. However I remembered that I'd picked this date from a list for when I would be available to speak to you and therefore I can't lay blame at Simon's door – my bad luck!

On one level it is a simple story and could be taken at face value. If we did approach the reading this way then this would be a very short talk:

"If you've got money you can't enter the Kingdom of heaven. Right let's now do the prayers and move on to early coffee."

But are there other levels to this piece of scripture. There are certainly other views about what exactly it means. I will come onto these later.

It can be a troubling story. What if I analyse it and get the wrong answer or at least come to the conclusion that I know I don't really want. I am fortunate. Compared to many people on the planet now I am well off. Certainly by the standards of most of those around at the time this story from the Bible took place. In fact everyone in this congregation by the standards of 2000 odd years ago is living extremely comfortably. I don't know all of your personal circumstances but I feel fairly safe in saying that. To those disciples and to Jesus himself we are rich.

There is of course real poverty in many places in the world and in rich countries too. For work I get to travel to various cities in the UK: Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and of course London. Sadly it is all too easy to see those who are homeless or those who are suffering from addiction and mental illness and are living on the streets and probably as close to the biblical poor as you are likely to see in 21st century Britain. I also had the tiring but pleasurable experience of travelling to Philadelphia in America last week for work. Philadelphia is a nice city especially in the centre but I was warned that there was a real problem with drug abuse and homelessness and there would be evidence of that on the streets. I was prepared for the worst and had been told by 1 colleague that they had been to Philadelphia last year and had been stepping over people lying on the pavement to get into their hotel. I'm pleased to say it was nowhere near as bad as I had feared and you probably just pictured from my words. But there were people on some street corners and in some doorways who were clearly in real difficulties in their lives.

Does the Gospel passage mean that these people are going to inherit eternal life but me/we "rich" people will not. How do I feel about that, how do we feel about that? I should be clear I'm not going to begrudge those people that, not at all, they really need God in their lives, but I'm starting to feel sorry for myself and more than a little bit worried.

Is Jesus telling us we are doing this all wrong if we want to have eternal life?

This seems harsh. Can't we say our place in the system is one that benefits many other people. Keeps them out of poverty? If I have some money and go to the shops and spend some - I'm giving income to the people who work in the shop, those who supply the goods. I go on holiday and I support the local economy and some more of my money stays behind when I leave with happy memories. Let's scale it up and I buy a car I'm now supporting the manufacturer of the thousands of components which have gone into the car that people that have assembled it, transported it, promoted it, placed it in a car showroom and then taking me out for a test drive. Let's go a step further I'm buying a house the materials and people involved in building that property have all been supported by me for a period until they move on to the next project. I've had money, or rather large loans, but I've spent it in a way which has benefited me but also benefitted others. Is this going to get me excluded from heaven?

I'm also conscious when looking at the story that my analysis could be biased. Confirmation bias – the tendency to search for, interpret, favour and recall information in a way that confirms or supports ones prior beliefs and values.

There's a lawyer joke or rather a grumble about lawyers not giving clear answers which goes like this: Client what's the answer to my legal problem? Lawyer well that's difficult, what do you want the answer to be?!

So with these issues swirling around in my head, and probably now in yours too, let's take a look at the passage in more detail.

The passage begins with Jesus starting on his way again when a man ran up to him knelt before him and asked him "good teacher what must I do to receive eternal life?"

Somewhat surprisingly Jesus' response is "Why do you call me good, no one is good except God alone." Then Jesus lists the five non-religious commandments in response to which the man says "teacher" he has quickly learned not to say "good teacher". Perhaps he hoping for a more positive response having now got Jesus on side and says "ever since I was young I've obeyed all those commandments."

In Mark's gospel the story continues with Jesus looking at the man with love and saying you need only do one thing - sell all you have and give the money to the poor, then come and follow me.

The gospel explains that the man is rich and that he walks away sadly. This causes Jesus to say to his disciples how hard it will be for rich people to enter the Kingdom of heaven. The disciples are all shocked this is because at this time and riches were seen as a sign of great favour from God. Jesus then utters the immortal words it is much harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of god than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. The disciples are dumbfounded and ask Jesus who then is going to be saved? Jesus gives the cryptic answer: this is impossible for man but not for God, everything is possible for God.

Finally the disciples asked Jesus well we have left everything and followed you so what's our position going to be? Jesus says to them you can be sure that you will be seated with me in heaven because everyone who has left houses or family or fields for his sake will receive more now and will be given internal life but many who are first now will be last many who now are last will be first.

This seems a relatively straightforward message. If you have a lot of wealth in this life you will not achieve eternal life. However I don't think it's quite so simple as that. If the rich man were to sell all of his possessions and give them to the poor those people would potentially now have more wealth than the former rich man with rich man effectively preventing them from entering into heaven with Jesus - surely not. It is also the case that two of the three gospels have Jesus saying that those who give up their current lives and follow him will receive 100 times more than they already had in return as well as eternal life. I think this is a reference to life on the road with Jesus which would mean that the disciples would stay in many houses with many supporters and new friends. Jesus is not therefore saying that you need to be destitute to enter the Kingdom of heaven.

It would also seem that this passage is not solely about the perils of wealth. It is after all perfectly possible to follow the commandments that Jesus listed but to have no faith or belief in Jesus. It is also possible to be poor middling doing OK or extremely wealthy and to follow the commandments and have no faith.

Some commentators have sought to aid the understanding of this story by explaining that there was a gate into Jerusalem which was called or nicknamed the needle. And that it was a small gate which meant that loaded camels would need to unload some or all of their burdens before being able to pass through the gate. However this doesn't really change anything in my view because it still conveys the idea that the rich man needs to get rid of his possessions before he can pass through the gate. Similarly other commentators have explained that the word for camel was also used for a type of rope and the expression is perhaps it is easier for a rope to pass through the eye of a needle. However this doesn't really change the meaning of the problems in understanding this part of the gospels in my view either again it suggests that if you have abundance in this case an abundance of material making up a rope rather than a very thin piece of thread then you're not going to get in through the needle or into heaven.

Some commentators exhort that efforts to construe and understand the story in anything other than its basic terms are also misguided and we should not make efforts to dilute the message. I agree with not diluting the message and not modifying it to make it more comfortable but I do think we can interpret it

in the light of life as it is around us. Strict literal interpretation of the story would be difficult to apply in reality as well. There is no guidance in the story as to when you cease to be poor or middling and become rich. This is therefore a value judgement. The only alternative to this is to define a figure above which you are rich. Jesus does not do that.

So what might Jesus be getting at?

What strikes me with this story is how the rich young man approaches Jesus and calls him Good teacher.. He had humility and respect for Jesus. Mark says Jesus looked on the man with love. He was not angry or disgusted at his wealth. But looked at him with love. Jesus accepted that he had lived a good life and followed the commandments. Perhaps the man was trying hard. He was trying to tick all the boxes and thought he would check with Jesus how he was doing? And Jesus lets him know there no there is still one more thing he must do.

However I read that perhaps the man is like many who think there is something missing in their life. In this case he has been successful, been favoured by God and followed the commandments – but still the man feels there is something missing - spiritually. So he seeks out Jesus to ask. Jesus looks at this man – loves him for what he is – but also sees that in him there is something missing, in fact getting in the way of his embracing God's kingdom. In this case his enjoyment of his material wealth – it must have been a real obstacle because the man does not say great – elated I'm so close now – all I have to do is this - thank you teacher that's what I will do – no - he goes away – sad.

The disciple are worried – who can be saved? Jesus says – this is impossible for man. But not for God. I see in this a message that even the rich man can get there – God can get that camel in via the needle's eye.

But the rich man won't get there by his own efforts and ticking boxes or filling spiritual voids to feel good about himself. So neither wealth or giving it all away is going to be enough. The key part of the message is not just the rich man getting rid of the wealth it is actually the next bit – following Jesus – following his way. Which is what Jesus then praises the disciples for doing and says they will have 100 times what they had before – before they even get to heaven.

Beyond this I think the passage is meant to show that we can't be self reliant – we must give up clinging on to the things that make us feel secure – and trust and follow in Jesus instead. The rich man's comfort led him to ask "what should I do" to secure heaven by my own efforts. Get closer to the poor is the answer and see what being powerless an reliant on others feels like. Be vulnerable and trust in God.

It might come down to what you are called to do. Some of the disciples still had possessions. Peter retained a house and a boat, others did too. Many early supporters of the church were rich. Perhaps we need to have the attitude to God that we would willingly do that, sell everything, if it were needed or we were ask by God to do that.

So I think we need to think more what is the thing I hold onto that actually keeps me away from Jesus? What am I being called to let go of?

I think this sits well with another familiar Bible passage which is 4 verses before the rich man, eye of the needle/camel metaphor. When Jesus says whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it. Is perhaps the rich man is another example of someone not accepting the kingdom of God like a child but someone who has too much of the material world that they are holding onto and valuing themselves and their own achievements too much.

As hard as this passage may seem there are two big silver linings first – Jesus loved the rich man – he loves us no matter that we fall short of the ideal – he also made clear, for God, rescuing any of us from ourselves is not impossible.

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