

THE MAN WHO JESUS LOVED

We don't know where he came from, or what happened to him.

He appeared on the scene just when Jesus was setting off again, on the final journey that culminated in his death. The man was young and rich. He fell to his knees in front of Jesus, like so many others who had begged Jesus for physical or mental healing.

The man said that he longed to *inherit* eternal life. He knew it was not for sale, so his money could not buy it. Inheritances go down from parent to children. So, eternal life would be passed on from God, to God's children. Obviously, to qualify to inherit, he must become a part of the family of God.

TOO PERSONAL

I wonder how he had expected Jesus to reply? Was he expecting reassurance. In answer to Jesus, he replies, 'Yes... yes... I've done all this.' Perhaps, he's hoping for Jesus' approval, or he's not too sure where he stands. Suddenly, he really seems to want to know the answer – and, suddenly, it all gets a bit too personal.

Jesus' first answer was quite general, now it seems as if Jesus looks deep inside him, and really sees what's going on.

It was obvious that the young man took his faith very seriously. But he seems to have had a gut-level feeling that, despite all his efforts, he was missing out. What 'more' must he *do*? What next step must he take? What would Jesus prescribe to heal his inner emptiness?

Jesus' reply was a radical, life-changing prescription to meet his need. It wasn't a totally impossible demand, or a Herculean test of faith, or an extreme requirement.

CLEARLY SHOCKING

What Jesus said was as clear as it was shocking. 'Large animals can't get through the eyes of needles, any more than rich people can get through the entrance into God's kingdom!'

Forget what you were taught in Sunday school about that small gateway in Jerusalem called the 'Eye of the Needle'. Modern research indicates that it never existed. Possibly, this myth about the gate developed to deflect

attention away from Jesus' shocking words – and who doesn't want to avoid facing such a statement? (So, 'let's divert into discussing gates and camels!').

The disciples struggle with what Jesus was saying. As far as they were concerned, the reason that wealthy people had all their money was because they were God's favourites. But, the young man in front of them had gone one better than being divinely favoured, he'd also kept the Commandments – he'd honoured his parents, didn't commit perjury, steal, murder, defraud, or commit adultery. Surely, they reckon, with all this, he's earned his way to the top of the pile?

The young man wants to know what Jesus prescribes to meet his need of finding eternal life. What should he *do* next? Jesus replies that it's not about *doing* anything else – rather, finding eternal life entails the surrender of one's whole self.

Jesus explains that the answer is for him, not just to turn his back on his possessions, but to go even further and to identify with those who are really poor.

HAVING NOTHING

There is an old riddle that asks, 'What does a rich man lack, that a poor man has in abundance?' The answer is 'Nothing.' The one thing that a rich person clearly lacks is the state of having nothing. It is precisely this that the young man needs to experience.

He's to stand in the shoes of the poor, and empathetically to redistribute his wealth to them. He's to be concerned about those trapped on the underside of life. The consequence of doing this would involve a radical shift in status and power. If 'money is power' then the risk is great. It's too much - he can't do it.

We're then let in on a secret. We hear that when Jesus gazes at him, his eyes are filled with unconditional love. It's as if this man, at that moment, was the apple of Jesus' eye. Did you realise this is the only time in Mark's gospel when Jesus is said to *love* any one particular person?

Our new Bishop of Tonbridge, Simon Burton-Jones, has this to say: 'The promise of a world to come in the Christian faith, foresees a day when the mighty have power wrenched from them, *and the poor can stand up and look others in the eyes with the dignity of peers*. The law, the prophets, Jesus and the apostles each bore witness to this word, and those who have

followed have sought to confer dignity and power upon the despised and powerless.' ¹ (my italics)

IMPATIENT OPTIMISTS

As you know, the second wealthiest man in the world is Bill Gates. He wouldn't call himself a Christian. His wife is a Roman Catholic. As you know, they give away vast sums of money (billions and billions of pounds). They try to visit as many of the projects they have set up, as they can. At the top of their charity's website are the words, 'All lives have equal value. We are impatient optimists working to reduce inequity.'

Back to our story: Jesus' discussions with the young man about inheriting eternal life, are sending the disciples bananas. If Jesus categorically rules out the rich (who are supposed to be God's favourites) then how can *anyone* make it into God's kingdom? What hope is there for his disciples? They lost nearly everything when they followed Jesus - they've not got much left to give away. Jesus gently explains that they've missed the point.

And we too may find ourselves disturbed. Our deeply ingrained instincts toward self-preservation and security get rocked by all of this.

DEEPEST SELF

Have you noticed, Jesus' priority isn't try to deprive the rich man of his money and power. Jesus is asking for much more. He is asking for the man's deepest self.

And the man discovers that there's even more to inheriting eternal life than empathetically helping the poor – at rock bottom, it's about surrendering one's whole self to God.

It's becoming increasingly clear that Jesus' *primary* call to the young man, and to us, is a call to a life of *discipleship*, not necessarily to a life of poverty.

In the end, what does this man who Jesus loves do? We finally see him leaving the scene dismayed and grieving. He's been relying on himself to live a good life - to be generous, honest, and upright. And Jesus, not unkindly, pulls the rug right out from under his feet. Yes, it's a nice rug, but it covered the truth that all wasn't as it seemed.

¹ <http://www.simonburton-jones.com/IN%20THE%20NEWS/The%20Acid%20Reflux%20Economy.html>

'In the end, this story is untameable'. It won't go into a tidy package. 'Like a parable, it resists simple explanations and denies loopholes, making us so uncomfortable that we are liable to talk circles around it in the hope of stumbling upon a basis for softening its message... again, like a parable, this story must be *experienced* rather than explained...'²

I'll close with these words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die'.

I wish I could soften today's gospel and say that it doesn't mean that. But I can't make it mean anything else.

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Sermon given at Bromley Parish church, November 2018*

² Workingpreacher.org