

Sermon for online service, 10th October 2021

Mark 10:17-31; Job 23:1-9, 16-end

All Bible quotations are NRSV

Recently, my daughter and I were listening to a podcast which included a discussion of comfort reading, something we may all feel in need of at the moment. Josie was inevitably deeply underwhelmed by the books I suggested as my comfort reading – too old fashioned, or too much crime writing, or in the case of Agatha Christie, too much of both those things. When I saw the readings for today, I reflected that one book of the Bible which I would not turn to if I needed comforting is Job. As Vicky said last week, it is a troubling book, and like her which I have many issues with it. I was relieved to see that the gospel was a passage from Mark, which I expected to find much more reassuring.

However, there is quite a lot in this passage too that is not hugely comforting, I expect that most of us would react rather like the man who runs up to Jesus, so excited to talk to and question him, but who then leaves mournfully after being told to sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. To give up all you own is at the very least an uncomfortable prospect. And then Jesus goes on to lay out that it is impossible for the rich – which here I think is defined pretty broadly- to enter the kingdom. It also seems that you can follow the rules all you want but it may not get you anywhere, which is what it apparently says in Job too. It's not necessarily a very uplifting message.

But there is something to make hearts lift here, indeed this is so in both readings (yes, even in Job, I have to admit it, although in my opinion it is a struggle to find it). And that is that we are left in no doubt that while for us, with our own strength to secure salvation may be impossible, (or impossible, as an old Bible I have puts rather beautifully translates it), we can be confident that “for God all things are possible.” (10:27) The same point is made in Zechariah: “Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people...should it also seem impossible to me, says the Lord of hosts?” (8:6)

How does Jesus make that point in this passage? His choice of commandments here is interesting (and it's worth saying that “do not defraud” is not one of the Ten Commandments, and Jesus may have been thinking of the injunction in Deuteronomy to give fair wages to the poor, wherever they are from (24:14-15)). Everything Jesus mentions is to do with our relationships with, and treatment of, each other: we should not be violent, or betray our partners,

or steal, or lie, or cheat; we should honour our parents (10:19). Then, of course, he takes this further by emphasizing how critical it is to give to the poor (10:21). Jesus' focus is on the spirit of the law, on the need to protect, help, respect and care for each other. The rich man, however, has his focus on the letter of the law, following it without thinking about what it really means. For God, a just world based on principles of justice, charity and respect for all is absolutely possible; for us it seems to be rather more of a problem to achieve.

And that is where the revolutionary part of this reading from Mark stands out. The rich man bounds up to Jesus thinking that he has it made, both now and probably for the world to come. He just needs a quick word with the teacher to fine tune the details. But Jesus had not come to reinforce the established order but to overturn it. He rejected the idea that wealth should be seen as a sign of God's blessing for obedience, although at the time that was widely accepted (Deut 28:11; 30:9-10), hence the disciples' astonishment at his words (10:23-26). It is also quite clear from the Old Testament, however, that regardless of whether or not wealth is viewed as a blessing it should be used to help others and not be hoarded (e.g. Deut 15:7-8). As Jesus is quoted as saying in Matthew, "Do not store up...treasures on earth... but store up treasures in heaven" (Matt 6:19-21). Perhaps we could see this as advice to store up treasure in heaven by how we use our treasure on earth. What Jesus seems to be saying here in Mark, with some exaggeration involving a camel and the eye of a needle to get the point across, is that wealth, rather than being a blessing, can, especially if hoarded, become a barrier between us and God. Riches here I think may represent anything which we allow to get in the way of our relationship with God. Jesus is also turning society on its head: "many who are first will be last and the last will be first" (10:31). You can see why in the past many people feared what would happen if the Bible were translated and more widely read when you look at verses like that. For God, it is possible to change society completely; for God it is possible to remove anything that separates us from him; we just need to respond.

At the heart of the rich man's question is how he can get eternal life; to him it is clearly something that he can reach by following the rules, and also something that he understands as in the future, and perhaps also sees as a possession, something he can buy. Arguably Jesus seems to agree that it is in the future, saying that those who follow him will have eternal life "in the age to come"(10:30). When I preached in August on part of chapter 6 of John, however, it did not seem as if when Jesus talked about eternal life he was talking about

the future. Then later in that gospel Jesus says: "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (John 17:3) Therefore, eternal life is not a future hope, as the rich man thinks, but is happening now. To follow Jesus is to enter into eternal life, or the kingdom of God, in the present. "The age to come" started with Jesus.

Salvation, meanwhile, is not something we can earn but a gift of God's grace; indeed it is only possible through God's grace, which is why Jesus says that salvation is impossible for people, but not for God. The man who questions Jesus does not see this, although Jesus still loves him for his attempts to understand. The rich man feels entitled to eternal life and salvation because of his obedience of the law; he does not appreciate that God's gift of grace should be received wholeheartedly and with trust like a child. This may be the reason that Mark placed the account of the rich man immediately after Jesus rebuking the disciples for trying to turn children away, saying "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (10:15). God's grace is what makes the impossible possible.

It is rather less comforting though to read that, despite all the lovely things which we are promised for following Christ, and which I think can be summed up as having a loving community around us, and what we need to sustain us, we are also told that there will be "persecutions" (10:30). We are not being promised an easy ride. This point is left out by Matthew (19:16-30) and Luke (18:18-30) in their descriptions of this encounter, but Mark obviously thought it was important to include it. The thought of persecutions themselves is not a happy one. Is it just a question of balance - you may suffer, but look at all these wonderful things you will get, so that's ok? This is where Job comes in. Job, with his patience, which must have been really hard for his wife and friends to understand (and for me too, to be honest) shows that we can endure if we suffer for our faith. Job never seems to doubt that God is there, and so gives us the encouragement that God is ever present, even if we cannot see him, even if we feel he has turned away from us, as Job did (23:8-9). The meaning of the last verse of today's reading from Job is disputed (23:17). It can be grim: "if only I could vanish in darkness and thick darkness would cover my face!" But it can, alternatively, be uplifting: "I am not destroyed by the darkness; he has concealed the thick darkness from me." (NRSV & notes to NRSV). Funnily enough, I prefer that second version. Even when we are struggling, God is there protecting us, keeping the darkness away, because for him all things are possible.

I started off by wondering how comforting today's readings are. It would not be surprising if Job had given in to despair; the rich man is told to sell everything, a hard teaching to accept. But comfort and the reassurance of God's love are there in both cases, because for God all things are possible. We are the ones who make things impossible, who overcomplicate them, and forget the spirit of the laws God has given us. The question we face now is how we respond when we are called, whether we are downcast like the rich man at what may be asked of us, or uplifted by the challenge to accept Jesus with trust and love like the children he blesses. We can choose whether we carry on as if this is impossible, or put our trust in God for whom all is possible.

Eliza Wheaton