

Sermon for Sunday 13th October 2024, Year B, Proper 23

Preached at St Serf Shettleston

Mark 10:17-31

Sermon

You may remember back in the early 1980s the comedy sketch show 'Not the Nine O'Clock News' on the telly, featuring Rowan Atkinson, Mel Smith, Griff Rhys Jones, Pamela Stephenson and so on. This was something I was far too young to watch according to my mother, although all my friends seemed to be able to talk about it endlessly at school. I'm not still bitter, honest.

Anyway, in that programme, and in various solo stand-up routines afterwards, Rowan Atkinson often included a line from today's gospel in one of his comedy monologues, one of those where he pretended to be a hapless priest or politician misquoting scripture.

"It is easier," he would begin, pompously. "It is easier for a rich man to pass through the eye of a needle, than it is for a camel to... than it is for a camel to."

I'm not sure how Rowan Atkinson managed to make that so funny, but it has nevertheless stuck with me all these years, to the point that whenever I read what Jesus actually said, I have to be very careful to get it the right way round!

It is of course one of Jesus' most famous sayings, that a camel would pass through the eye of a needle more easily than a rich man can enter the kingdom of God, but it is also one of his most challenging comments, and so there have been many attempts by scholars to make the text more comfortable for wealthy Christians. For example, Thomas Aquinas suggested that there is a small gate in Jerusalem called the 'eye of a needle' that a camel can only pass through if the shed their load of goods and get down on their knees. So it's not impossible for the camel

to pass through the eye of a needle (and therefore not impossible for a rich man to enter heaven), just very difficult, and they must take off their baggage first. Unfortunately, there's no other archeological or historical evidence of any gate with such a name in Jerusalem. Another attempt to reduce the strictness of Jesus' saying was to question whether the Greek word for camel - kamelos - should actually have been 'kamilos', which means a cable on a ship. Still rather thick to be passing through a needle, but at least not quite as impossible as a camel making it through. But again, there's no evidence of any gospel manuscripts using the word kamilos, and the saying appears in Matthew and Luke's gospels as well as Mark, and 'camel' is used every time.

So it seems that Jesus is indeed trying to point out that a rich man entering the kingdom of heaven is nigh on impossible, and this explains the shocked reaction of the disciples as they wonder aloud, "Then who can be saved?"

It's not that they think that giving up their possessions to follow Jesus is impossible – after all, most of them have done just that. They're shocked and astounded because in those days everyone believed that wealth was a sign of spiritual virtue. Things were expected to go well for people of good character, while those who lacked virtue and self-discipline should by rights end up destitute. So, by telling the man to give up his possessions and follow him in order to be perfect, Jesus was totally reversing the naturally assumed order of things, which is why our gospel reading ends with Jesus declaring that "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first". You may have thought the wealthy were blessed, but in fact everything worthwhile is so much harder for them!

According to Jesus, the kingdom of God (or eternal life – which seems to be the same thing in Jesus' teaching) is simply not accessible for those who hold too tightly to their wealth. The problem seems to be not the money itself, but the way it tempts people to trust only in themselves for their ultimate security and

comfort. If you can rely on your own money to sort out your problems, you don't really need other people, and you don't need God, and this runs completely counter to everything Jesus teaches us about the vital importance of trusting relationships in building the kingdom of God. The more wealth we possess, the more power we can command and the less we need to empathise with others or care what they think, or want. It's not an inevitable consequence, but it's a constant danger.

In fact, some ancient manuscripts have a different wording that says it more explicitly in verse 24. Jesus says, "Children, how hard it is *for those who trust in riches* to enter the kingdom of God". It's not necessarily the rich who have the problem, but those who trust in riches. Unfortunately, these are so often the same people.

It may seem like Jesus is being really hard on the rich man, immediately criticising him for calling Jesus good, and then condescendingly lecturing him about the commandments; but the gospel says that Jesus loved him, and he offers him the true path to heaven, which is to give away his dependence on his own possessions and instead join the community that is following Jesus. He's not taunting the man with something impossible, but showing him the way forward. The man has knocked at Jesus' door, seeking spiritual freedom and Jesus has flung it wide and invited him in. It's just that the selfishness can't fit through the door. He has to let it go. Oh, the anguish that he can't do it, and he knows it, and goes away grieving. Perhaps he can see what he truly desires right there in front of him – a community of unconditional acceptance, forgiveness and love, a dependence on God and others for mutual support rather than only on himself; but he can't quite trust it. What if he gives up his safety net and Jesus lets him down? These people are fishermen and outcasts. No, the money is more reliable. But still, it hurts to walk away, a failure, when in the rest of his life he'd been a complete success.

It may be tempting to read this gospel passage simply as a warning against reliance on personal wealth, and there's no doubt the reading does say that. But I've always felt that when it comes to our religion, the carrot is far stronger than the stick. What we yearn for changes us far more than the rules we're given to follow. If a preacher says, "You won't get to heaven if you don't give generously to charity!" then maybe we'd give more to charity as a result, but it probably hasn't changed our heart. In fact, we might just end up more proud, or more resentful, or more entitled, or more judgemental of others.

In my preaching I always come back to this: I don't believe we enter God's kingdom by following religious rules. I believe we enter God's kingdom by building loving relationships with those around us. The relationships themselves are the foretaste of heaven, and it's our yearning for God's kingdom that begins to transform us and make us ready to be part of it.

The reason Jesus tells the man to sell his possessions and give to the poor is because that's his way forward into open-hearted relationship with God and with the small group of misfits following Jesus around the countryside. They have nothing except trust in Jesus and later, trust in each other, but somehow, it turns out that this is everything that's needed for God's kingdom to appear.