

You may well think that this evening's passage from Mark is very familiar. I remind you of my frequently voiced caution that great familiarity can frequently cause us to miss real meaning. St. Paul said in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians *When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put away childish things.* Unfortunately many of us have arrested development when it comes to things we first learned in Sunday School.

So let us give some adult attention to the passage for it is full of meaning. One of the reasons it is so familiar is that it is a story that is told in each of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There are only minor variations in the story among the three. I doubt that any of us could hear the story told and immediately be able to identify from which of the three gospels it comes. The other reason it is so familiar is the image of a camel going through the eye of a needle. A long time ago, I was told that the image refers to a gate to the old city of Jerusalem that was shaped like the eye of a needle that limited the amount of baggage a camel could bring into the city. In fact, there is neither historical or archeological evidence of such a gate. The first mention of the gate theory came from St. Anselm, the 11<sup>th</sup> century Archbishop of Canterbury. Since he was the same cleric responsible for the appalling doctrine of atonement, I am only too happy to abandon the gate theory. Some scholars believe that "camel" is a mistranslation from Greek. In Greek camel is k-a-m-e-l-o-s while rope is k-a-m-i-l-o-s, but both words would have been pronounced the same or very close. With the image, Jesus is presenting a hyperbole to illustrate a serious impossibility, neither a rope nor a camel is going through the eye of a needle. It is really only a question of how "hyper" you like your hyperbole.

The first thing worth pointing out is why does Jesus chastise the guy for calling him good because only God is good? This needs to be paired with the statement a little later in the reading in response to the disciples asking after the camel statement, *Then who can be saved?* Jesus says, *For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.* Jesus is saying that salvation cannot be bought which is, in part also in response to the young man's question, *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* Here the interesting word is "inherit". Two things must be understood about "inherit". Firstly, it is the passing on of wealth usually within a family and usually at least in those times within a truly rich family. Keep in mind that the disciples were all poor and of low social status. For them the young rich man would automatically been seen as a person of high status. It would have astonished the disciples that he was to have difficulty inheriting eternal life. Once again Jesus is overturning the accepted way of things in this passage. Secondly, someone has to die in order that one might inherit. This story, in Mark, comes between the second and the third time Jesus predicts his death and resurrection. With God and with the death and resurrection of Jesus salvation is a possibility for all. But while only God can save, we can reject salvation through attachments that get in the way. That is why Jesus says to the young man *you lack one thing.* He lacks the

ability to put his relationship with God above all other considerations. The phrase “lack one thing” is used, depending upon the English translation, between 11 and 16 times in the Bible all of them meaning a failure to put relationship with God first.

Another interesting thing about this passage is Jesus’ recitation of the commandments. Note that he only mentions the second table of the commandments. The ten commandments are in two tables. The first table commandments are about our relationship with God. The second table commandments are about our relationship with each other. Although there are 7 in the second table Jesus sums up the last two about covetous with *You shall not defraud*. In other words, do not seek to acquire anything that is not rightly yours. In the Shema which we will say right after this homily all of the second table are summarized as Love your neighbour as yourself. That is what Jesus is telling the young man. Salvation cannot be bought, and as I said in a recent homily, I think when last I preached on Sunday, you cannot keep table 1 without keeping table 2, and you only have strength to keep table 2, if you keep table 1. The young man had trouble with both tables because his affection for his possessions was in the way of his relationship with God and clearly mattered more to him.

Lastly, I’d like to draw your attention to the line which appears between Jesus recitation of the commandments and his instruction to the young man to sell his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor and follow Jesus: *Jesus looking at him, loved him....* Jesus reflected the unconditional love of God for his creation. I think we could say that Jesus loved him in sadness because for all his sincerity and genuine desire for eternal life he was blocked by his wealth.

If rich people cannot go to heaven, we all are in big trouble because no matter how low we may stand in the wealth ranks in Canada, we are richer than roughly 90% of the world’s population. It is not our wealth that blocks us from God; it is how we regard it and what we do with it. It is not only wealth that can block. Pride, status, power can equally be barriers.

In my now quite long life, I have been fortunate to have had many friends older than I who are now no longer with us. The one thing that I would observe of every one of them is that as they realized this life was coming to an end, they were determined to get rid of possessions. It was so clear that every time something went out the door they felt liberated. Unfortunately, there is a great deal of that stuff now cluttering up our house. Our days of becoming liberated are not so terribly far off. Especially because the time between not having much and having much too much now seems really quite short.

Whether our wealth can be counted in billions or only hundreds, not one of us will go out of this world with anything. It is what we did with what we had and how that honoured God and cared for neighbour will be all that matters. Amen