

I begin this evening with a confession. I cribbed a lot for this homily from one I delivered last summer. I will explain as I go.

As is so often the case, it is important to set the context for our reading from Matthew this evening. It follows the very familiar story of the rich young man who presents himself to Jesus and asks how he might secure salvation. Jesus tells him that he must obey the commandments, the young man replies that he has done so all his life. What else must I do he asks. Jesus tells him that if he wishes to be perfect, he must sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor and follow me. The passage concludes: *When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.* Our passage begins after that with Jesus' discourse with the disciples. *Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'*

If you come to Evening Prayer regularly, you may recall that I preached on the Markan version of this story on August 13th this past summer. The story appears in each of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Which is why it is so familiar. Last summer I said, noting the familiarity: 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 nor archeological evidence of such a gate. The first mention of the gate theory came from St. Anselm, the 11th century Archbishop of Canterbury. Since he was the same cleric responsible for the appalling doctrine of substitutionary 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 identically or very close to identically. 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.

Perhaps the most important statement in this evening's reading. When the disciples ask who can be saved *For mortals it is impossible, Jesus says, but for God all things are possible.* The young man put his trust in all the things he had, which got in the way of his trust in God. We know that in Exodus 20 God instructs *You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.* In our Eurocentric way, we presume that idols are primitive images or sculptures that "pagan" people bow down and worship. Meanwhile we ignore all the idols with which our lives and the lives of many among us are replete. Money, power, mansions, fast cars, yachts, exotic food, expensive drink, exquisite clothes, jewels, luxurious vacations the list goes on and on. Nothing in this list is intrinsically wrong or evil. It is our attitude to them, our

dependence on them, our greed for them, the self-worth we associate with them, and the dismissal of those who lack them that make them pernicious and most importantly distance us from God.

The young man followed all the commandments, but for him that was not enough. He couldn't trust that God would be there for him; he had to do something or more likely had to buy something. He believed his money was his power and he wanted to use that power to get a guarantee of eternal life. To use a term quite often used today he couldn't put aside his agency he had to do something, trust in God was not enough for him. Jesus could see that his money was, for him, a block to eternal life because of his fixation on it and his identify being entirely bound up in having lots of money and the vanity of expecting to make things happen.

Think of situations today when the world has never known richer people. When the board of a major corporation adopts a plan to pay its CEO and major shareholder \$1 trillion, what hope of salvation is there for those who adopted the plan and how much less for the CEO. Newsflash, he like we, will arrive in the next life equally penniless as the poorest newly dead person. Jesus concludes our passage: *But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.* All the things that make us first or in the first few cohorts in this life ill prepare us for life in the Kingdom unless we have used all that we have been given in this life in the service of the Kingdom. As you have heard from me many times that simply means love of God and neighbour and acting on that love.

Again in August, I said the following: 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. 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 while here with what we had and how that honoured God and cared for neighbour will be all that matters. Amen