

Mark 10: 17-31

Amos 5: 6-7, 10-15; Hebrews 4: 12-end

Whenever problems occur on the rail network, the various train operating companies are often keen to apologise to their customers for any delays or cancellations that may occur on the network. So, when you're standing at Worthing Station, it's almost guaranteed that at some stage you're going to hear the dulcet tones of the lady over the tannoy announcing, 'We are sorry to inform you that the 7:30 Southern Service to London Victoria is delayed by approximately 20 minutes due to signaling problems near Havant. Southern apologise for any inconvenience this may cause'; or now that autumn has arrived, you'll no doubt hear the classic, 'We are sorry to inform you that due to a leaf falling on the line near Haywards Heath, the 10:30 Southern service to Littlehampton has been cancelled. Southern apologise.....[and so on].' Now it's all very nice having these train companies taking the trouble to apologise to you about all these various hiccups. But in the end, as much as one would like to think

that their apologies are sincere, we all know that, in reality, they are simply a formality. They're simply going through the motions, as it were. Making these frequent apologies simply makes for good customer relations – they're not really sincere at all.

Now the Gospel passage appointed for today forms part of a really challenging section of Mark's Gospel. It's a section of his Gospel which touches upon various aspects of the theme of discipleship, outlining what precisely is required of us if we are sincerely seeking to follow the Lord. It confronts us with the basic question, 'How sincere am I in my desire to follow the Lord?' 'Am I truly committed to walking in *his* Way, or am I simply going through the motions - the formalities of religion?' This section of the Gospel should really challenge us to think about the *sincerity* of our faith.

And in this particular passage, we touch upon the specific problem with material possessions as a hindrance to total trust in God. It begins with an incident in which a man comes to Jesus with a

pressing question. In Matthew's account of the incident, he's referred to as a 'young man', while Luke adds that he was a 'ruler', hence the traditional designation of this guy as a 'rich young ruler'. But whatever his exact identity, the key issue is that he had great material wealth. Yet, unlike the many religious leaders who had tried to test Jesus by their trick questions, this man was a genuine enquirer – he demonstrates a real keenness in searching after the truth. He is seeking eternal life and so he asks Jesus what he must do to attain it. He has clearly been a good-living person, someone who has meticulously kept the Law - God's commandments. But evidently, he was still not satisfied - he was looking for something deeper. And he certainly came to the right person to enquire about this. In fact, when we read about this guy, we can't help but feel that there is something really admirable about his attitude, and Our Lord himself perceives this in the man. But the crucial question is whether he is really willing, in the end, to go the full distance. He wants eternal life and by following Jesus he will indeed find what he is searching for. But there's one thing which stands in

the way of him being able to sincerely follow the Lord - and that, of course, is his material wealth. For in telling him to sell what he owns and give the money to the poor, Jesus is inviting him to do something which runs contrary to the previous direction of his whole life. If he is to be a true, a genuine disciple, then he must let go of his wealth, which until now, he has so much put his trust in. For him, his wealth was getting in the way of his becoming a true follower of the Lord. And so, he's confronted with a stark choice - earthly riches or the Kingdom of God. Sadly for him, he was unwilling to give up his wealth - it was too powerful a pull for him - and so he goes away grieving.

And then we get some further reflection upon this incident. The disciples clearly found this all a bit difficult to understand. Because in *their* society, wealth was seen as a great blessing from God - to them it was inconceivable that the rich and powerful could be excluded from the Kingdom of God. But what they don't realise is that in God's Kingdom, the attitudes and assumptions of this world are turned

upside down, because in *his* Kingdom, “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

And finally, the costs of discipleship are spelt out in broader terms, embracing all things that enrich our earthly lives, including family relationships. Our Lord does not in any way disguise any of the costs of following him. But in the end, the costs are far outweighed by the gain of belonging to the family of God’s Kingdom, and the joy of inheriting eternal life. The disciples of Jesus might have given up everything and possess nothing in material terms, but they are now truly rich in every area of life.

So, if we are sincerely seeking to follow the Lord, then what can we take away from this encounter. Well, here are at least three things:

First of all, I believe each one of us is being challenged here to ask ourselves the crucial question, ‘What do *I* need to give up - to let go of - if I am to sincerely follow the Lord?’ ‘What things get in the way of *my* relationship with the Lord - what

hinders me from coming closer to him?’ For the rich young ruler it was his material wealth - this was *his* particular stumbling-block, as it were. And the danger of materialism is certainly a pertinent issue for us living in our contemporary western society. Compared to the majority of people in our world today, we *do* live a very comfortable, (we could even say) luxurious, lifestyle. We have access to nice housing, nice cars, nice food, generous healthcare provision - we are truly spoilt for choice. And so, it’s so tempting for us to take comfort in our material possessions - to make these things our ‘god’. They can all too easily distract us from our walk with the Lord.

Now it’s important to add a note of caution here. Our Lord isn’t simply saying that *all* rich people should give up their wealth, *per se*, in order to enter the Kingdom of God. There are actually many prominent Christians with wealth and power, who nevertheless do not actually become obsessed with their material wealth, but who rather aim constantly to put God first in the hearts and lives. But, it’s

certainly the case that those who are rich and powerful in society *are* more inclined to trust these things, rather than giving themselves wholly in faith to God.

Now, of course, wealth and material possessions might not actually be key concerns for *us*. We might feel that there are other things getting in the way of our relationship with the Lord - preventing us from wholeheartedly following Jesus. Perhaps we are associating with certain people or groups of people we shouldn't be, or maybe there are certain things we do which are not pleasing to God? Well, if this is the case, we need to let go of these things. We need to do something about it.

Then secondly, the Lord's encounter with the rich man speaks plainly to us of the fact that an absolute commitment is required. There are no 'half-larks' here. The rich young ruler was confronted with a straight choice - Jesus does not in any way lower the level of commitment required. There's no room here for compromise. If the man sincerely wanted to

follow the Lord and to inherit eternal life, then he simply had to change his way of life - he couldn't carry on the way he was.

Now there are some churches today who all too easily allow for compromises to be made, even making out that the Christian life is somehow an 'easy ride'. You see it very clearly in the popularity of the so-called concept of 'prosperity theology', which originated in the southern states of the US and has since taken hold in parts of West Africa and South East Asia. The 'name it - claim it' teaching of the peddlers of the 'prosperity gospel' encourages people to believe that if they have enough faith, they stand to gain material possessions - that nice property, that brand new Mercedes, and so on. In contrast to this, Our Lord's teaching here makes it clear that, more often than not, if we are sincerely seeking to follow him, then we will be required to *give up* things, to make sacrifices, to deny ourselves. The costs of following him can indeed be great.

And thirdly, we're reminded here of the importance

of holding onto the promises of Jesus. Peter states, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." He's basically saying, 'We've given up everything to follow you, but in the end, is it all really worth it?' It was a fair question. And we too, as those seeking to follow Christ today, can often feel compelled to ask the same question - 'is it really worth it?' When we see the attitudes and behaviour of people in wider society - the greed, the wickedness, the selfishness - we can all too easily get disheartened. Is being a Christian really worth the sacrifice? When we feel like this, we need to be reminded constantly of the words of Christ. Yes, following him might indeed mean making sacrifices in the here and now, but all who do so are promised abundant life now in the Kingdom of God and life everlasting. It's about grasping hold of the bigger picture - constantly looking to things eternal - trusting the promises of Christ, for his promises are true.

In this respect, I often gain a great deal of inspiration from reading the accounts of Christians in different parts of the world today who face persecution on

account of their faith. They truly know what it is to make sacrifices and to endure persecution for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And they know that all this is indeed worth it, *because they* put their trust in Christ's promises. What an example they are to us!

So, in conclusion. I believe that God's word to us this morning should really make us feel uncomfortable. We can all too easily feel that all is right with our faith - that we're doing nicely, thank you. But Our Lord's teaching should really challenge our sense of complacency. The reading from the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that the living word of God is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. The words of the Lord Jesus to the rich man certainly cut right through to the thoughts and intentions of *his* heart. And they challenge us, too, to take a good look at *ourselves* and the state of *our* relationship with the Lord. They are indeed sharper than a two-edged sword – a real test of our sincerity – are we truly 100% committed to following Christ? The costs of discipleship might be great, but in the

end, the eternal rewards are immeasurable.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you call us to follow you. By the power of your Spirit, help us to cast aside those things which come in the way of our relationship with you. And help us to commit our lives fully to you, trusting in your unfailing promises. Amen.