

## SERMON FOR ORDINARY SUNDAY 28B

### FR JORDAN GREATBATCH

Who wants to be a millionaire? I have a sneaky suspicion we all do if we're honest. Why else do we buy lotto tickets? Why do we watch reality shows or read about people trying to win lots of money? I suspect it's because we secretly deep down inside wish we were doing it too. It sounds good, doesn't it?

How nice it would be to pay off all our debts, be able to know that we didn't have to worry about things going wrong, like the car breaking down, and having to find the money for repairs. Wouldn't life be that much easier not having to worry about where the money was coming from? It's interesting to hear those who do win money say what they will spend it on. Usually on a house, car, children's education and such like. We don't often hear people say they will give it to their favorite charity. But then I suspect if I am completely honest I wouldn't either. I suppose there's no harm in dreaming.

The unfortunate thing is that today's gospel is one of those uncomfortable ones which goes right against what I've been talking about. It's a gospel about money – there's no way around that.

The rich man who comes to Jesus is really just like most of us. He asks the question we all ask at some stage of life. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" That perpetual and perplexing question. And Jesus' answer is equally perplexing. "You know the commandments." And the man responds that he does. And that would be true for most us. But one thing is lacking. The more we have, the more difficult it is to give it up, it seems. So the man goes away.

Then Jesus makes that famous yet ludicrous statement, 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.' Not only ludicrous, but also impossible. You see, the disciples had grown up with the notion that if someone was prosperous, then God had blessed them. Riches and possessions were a sign of God's favour. It's not only the disciples who thought that. The notion is alive and well today in some Christian circles commonly known as the prosperity Gospel.

So the disciples ask "Then who can be saved?" If possessions don't save, and following the commandments doesn't save, then what's the point? Jesus wants the disciples and us to know that it is only God who can save. Nothing we do will produce salvation. It is a grace to be received with gratitude.

Oh the relief. I don't have to do anything to be saved. God has done it already in Jesus. All I need to do is accept what is offered. Accept the love that God shows in the person of Jesus. Maybe that's easier said than done; because like the rich man, can I cope with that sort of love when it is offered to me? Jesus offered his love to the rich man, but the rich man couldn't take it. The rich man thought he had everything; obedience to the commandments and riches. There was nothing for him to receive. The only way he could receive it is if he had a need. And he wasn't prepared to be a person in need. Just like many other people in our world.

This tension is further heightened by the Apostle Peter who says "What about us? We have left everything and followed you." Jesus promises that they will receive more than they have given up. Clearly poverty is not the end of the process. The requirement laid on the rich man is not a call for everyone to abandon everything and accept poverty. Though throughout church history many have felt that call, but that is another matter. It's about knowing what is really needful for true life, abundant life as Jesus calls it. And that will perhaps vary with each one of us. It's not about becoming poor; it's about abandoning ourselves to the love of God and seeing where it might lead us.

But there is a catch. "Not without persecutions" is the catch. I was sitting in a discipleship course this week and we were reading the same story of the young man found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 18:18-30. Someone pointed out that in Luke's version is missing the line "**Not without persecutions**" This can change the way we approach the text. For wouldn't be nice if there were no tensions? No 'persecutions.'

For there will always be tension around the issue of wealth. Being a disciple means there will some sense never be a permanent peace with the world. The world, after all, values money and possessions and the power that goes with it. So the tension to have more, to earn more, to possess more is always present. There is also the tension of the call to follow Jesus. The tension to accept the love we are offered. How can we do that? No, we don't need to give up everything, but we do need to ensure that our possessions are not the goal of our existence. And then there is a further tension in this story. The rich man says he knows and follows all the commandments. And even here Jesus warns of relying on our own sense of righteousness, for even the pursuit of virtue can become a source of pride.

The goal is therefore is not following an idea or a perception but a person. The person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Our calling is to do that with singleness of heart so that we can both accept his love, and give it away freely.

I have said this as though it applies to us as individuals. The tension is just as true for the church, the body of Christ. Are we really following and allowing the things we have to be used in God's service? A salutary question for the parish as it is for the Diocese and the church at large. Maybe it is for us as individuals to be living in the tension between following and our possessions, then the church at large will reflect that same desire to follow what Christ teaches.

Jesus' teaching about giving up everything is truly demanding. It seems though that this is the only way to receive a hundredfold, now, and in eternal life. This is another description of Easter living; giving up is dying so that we might have new life. Receiving a hundredfold now is experienced in terms of already sharing in the glory of eternal life that Jesus offers. We share that glory here in the Eucharist where the Easter mystery is made plain for us, and we are part of that mystery once again. This is the place where Jesus gives away his life that we might have fullness of life. Life abundant.