Family Service Talk 28th June 2020

Mark 10:17-27

The rich and the kingdom of God

17As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. ‘Good teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’

18‘Why do you call me good?’ Jesus answered. ‘No one is good – except God alone. 19You know the commandments: “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honour your father and mother.”’

20‘Teacher,’ he declared, ‘all these I have kept since I was a boy.’

21Jesus looked at him and loved him. ‘One thing you lack,’ he said. ‘Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’

22At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

23Jesus looked round and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!’

24The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25It 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.’

26The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, ‘Who then can be saved?’

27Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.’

This is a really good passage to read at this moment when for the last 17 weeks and more, every waking thought has been related to the coronavirus and its very dramatic effect on our lives. Many people have, every day, watched and listened to the government briefing from Downing Street so that they would know what they could and couldn’t do (far more regularly and determinedly than many of us read the Bible, I suspect!) The whole country has been waiting for the all-important R number to drop and the question on everyone’s lips of ‘when will we be able to go back to normal?’, has slowly become ‘what will the new normal look like?’

And for a nation where nothing like this has happened before in most people’s lifetime, it has been a very understandable and human response. But …… we are in danger of letting something become bigger and more important than God.

For many billions of people the world over, before this pandemic struck, their lives were filled with a focus that didn’t include God. It may be that they were driven to make and keep as much money as possible (like the man in the story) so that they felt safe and secure; it may be that they were driven to succeed academically – a good education would bring a good job and again security in life; or it may even be that they were driven by a need to provide food for their family for them to simply survive.

All these are valid things to focus on, just like concern about Covid-19, but none of them (including Covid-19) are more important than God.

And indeed, after a few weeks of lockdown we discovered that many people out there were actually doing what the young man in the story was doing – they were investigating God. We are told that many more people were joining live-streamed services than would normally go to church, people were searching on-line for the answers to their questions about God, they were listening to the UK Blessing, they were wanting to know more …… More about what God is offering …… what His love looks like …… and means …… they were searching for certainty and truth in a time of deep uncertainty.

And that is exactly what the young man in the story was doing. In Mark’s gospel we learn very little about the man apart from the fact that he had great wealth. In Matthew’s gospel he is called a young man and in Luke’s gospel he is referred to as a ruler but beyond that, we know nothing – he was simply someone seeking to know more about what Jesus was offering and how he could get it. And how many of us today fit in that category?

Who knows what it was that prompted him to run to Jesus just before he left on His way to Jerusalem, but he clearly wanted what he had heard that Jesus was offering – eternal life in God’s kingdom. And I imagine that, being a very wealthy man, he was used to being able to have what he wanted when he wanted it.

Initially, he must have been very happy as he seemed clearly to tick all the boxes that Jesus mentioned. You can hear the pride in his declaration that he had … ‘kept the commandments since he was a boy’. He was clearly a good man who kept to the rules and lived the way he should …… I imagine, most of us would respond in a similar way.

We then read those wonderful words …… ‘Jesus looked at him and loved him (21)’ …… and I’m sure the man expected to be told – it’s fine, you’ve made it, you’re in. But ……. because Jesus loved him and wanted a better way for him, he told him the truth, however tough that was for the man to hear. Jesus knew that, for this man, his wealth was the most important thing in his life. But in order to follow Jesus … to be a part of God’s kingdom … to have eternal life with God … it was God that must be the most important part of his life. Indeed, in the first commandment God said ‘you shall have no other God but me.’

Jesus knew that the young man’s wealth was the most important thing in his life and unless he got rid of it, he would never be able to put God first …… he could therefore not follow Jesus and eternal life in God’s kingdom was not possible.

This applies to us too …… knowing God must be the most important thing in our lives - more than money, family, education, food, coronavirus, anything. That’s not to say we have to get rid of all these things but they must take their place as things to be used in God’s service and for His glory, not to build up our sense of pride and self-worth.

But, you might ask, how do we who, in comparison to so many, have so much, make sure that knowing God is the most important thing in our lives? Jesus said himself that it is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to be saved and to enter God’s kingdom (25).

Especially at this time when everything is so strange and uncertain, Jesus’ reply to his disciples is so incredibly humbling and reassuring …… ‘with man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.’

When we trust in Him for whom all things are possible, we know that he will guide us in the way to make God the most important part of our lives and will be with us on the right path leading us into everlasting life in God’s kingdom.

Help us Lord, today, to put our trust in your unfailing love and your desire that all may come to know you and put you first in their lives. Amen