

20th Sunday after Pentecost, St Bart's, 26 Oct 2025

HOMILY

Joel 2:23-32; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:15-30

I. Our Gospel reading today concerns the place of children in God's kingdom and the nature of true wealth. The first is easier to understand than the second. We can understand Jesus blessing the children and accepting them, but what does he mean by saying that those who are wealthy will find it difficult, if not impossible, to enter the kingdom of God? And why does he seem so dismissive of the man with his serious question?

In fact, in some places the Old Testament seems to suggest that wealth, riches and power come from God and are the rewards for a good life. And it was a common assumption in Jesus' day that wealth was the gift of God. It's a bit like the 'prosperity gospel' we sometimes hear about in certain circles: the view that God rewards believers with material prosperity and wealth. Fortunately, there are places in the Old Testament that challenge this appalling view of God, particularly the Book of Job.

II. And that's why the disciples in today's Gospel reading are so astonished at Jesus' reaction to the ruler, astonished at Jesus' attitude to wealth. They share the same worldview and believe that this man has surely been blessed by God, has been rewarded for his faithful living. But that's not Jesus' view of the matter at all nor is it the view of Luke the evangelist.

This is a man who has, yes, followed the commandments, who has lived a life of goodness and integrity towards his neighbours, and who yet feels there is something missing in his life, something crucial that should be there but isn't. That's why he asks Jesus the question, What must I do to inherit eternal life?

And note that Jesus, in his response, gives a thoroughly Jewish answer. He quotes from the Ten Commandments: about not killing, not committing adultery, not bearing false witness in court, not coveting anyone's goods or livelihood. We have no reason to doubt the man's sincerity here. He probably has achieved all that. He's a genuinely good person. But when Jesus calls him to discipleship he simply can't consent. His whole sense of security and identity is bound up with his wealth and power. And, even though he knows there's something missing in his life, he can't give up those external things in order to find what's missing in his life.

This man is being called to follow the radical example of Peter and James and John who have forsaken everything in order to follow Jesus; and the example too of Mary Magdalene and Susanna and Joanna, who have given away their wealth in order to make possible Jesus' whole mission. All of them have taken seriously Jesus' attitude to wealth: that it's to be shared with others, if not actually surrendered. This is the very thing the synagogue ruler in our story can't do.

III. Yet Jesus does not call the man to dump his wealth in the ocean, as if getting rid of a burden; he's not called to throw it away. On the contrary, he's called to give it to those who lack wealth, those who live a precarious life on the edge, who lack the protection he has because of his wealth. He is called to become a disciple of Jesus and, in order to do so, he needs to be prepared to give up everything for the sake of others.

And following Jesus is literally what he is called to do because that's what Jesus himself has done. The One who is most favoured by God, most genuinely and utterly good and righteous, is Jesus himself who embraces a life of poverty in becoming human for us. In speaking of Christ, Paul says to the Corinthians: *You know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.*

That's why Jesus assures the disciples in our reading that, whatever sacrifices they have made, they will be compensated in abundance. What they have left behind in terms of family and security will be supplied in new ways, new kinds of 'wealth': in the communion of saints, in the joy of finding in Christ the very source of eternal life.

IV. So what does the Gospel reading have to say to us today? In the first place, it calls us to take children seriously as Jesus does: not to patronise them but to be prepared to learn from them, from their openness and trust. We are called to childlike and to be open to what the smallest and the least can teach us.

The Gospel also invites us to examine our interior lives, our own spirituality, and to recognise the longing that lies within each one of us, that sense of emptiness, of something missing from our hearts and lives. Our spiritual forbears referred to it as the 'inconsolable longing', the yearning for something that can't be satisfied by any weight of wealth or family or status or power.

St Augustine, who was born in the fourth century, wrote his spiritual autobiography (his Confessions) as a direct address to God. Near the beginning he says to God: 'You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.' That's what the ruler in our passage has experienced in his question to Jesus: that divine restlessness. Jesus's response is to call him into radical discipleship, to become as trusting as a child, and to be fully satisfied in knowing God, in surrendering everything to God.

That's also our calling as disciples of Jesus: to become like children, to respond to the deep longings of the heart and surrender our lives more and more to God; to give up whatever stands in the way — anything we rely on for ultimate security and identity that is not God.

But this is not just a passage about spirituality. It is also about social justice, one of the great themes of St Luke's Gospel. It's about giving ourselves to others, especially the poor, the vulnerable, the needy. It's about justice and equity for those who should not have to live with the fear and insecurity of poverty.

V. Today's Gospel calls us to become as open and trusting as children: to look inwards at our own spirituality, our own longing for God, and to look outwards at those who are poor; to work towards justice for those who need it, and to create a welcoming culture in our society and our church. Our reward is the brothers and sisters we gain in the struggle. Our reward even more is to find Christ as our deepest desire, the one who, for our sake, became poor so that we might become rich.

Thanks be to God.

Mthr Dorothy