

Year B, Proper 23, 2021, Mark 10.17-31, The rich young man

May the words of my mouth...

All the diamonds in this world
That mean anything to me
Are conjured up by wind and sunlight
Sparkling on the sea

The above are words by the Canadian song-writer Bruce Coburn. Let's hear them again as we ponder the meaning of today's gospel known simply as The rich young man.

All the diamonds in this world
That mean anything to me
Are conjured up by wind and sunlight
Sparkling on the sea

It is a beautiful image pointing to a wealth that is not to be found in many possessions, but in the appreciation of things created. Is it necessary to live close to the sea or a lake to appreciate this image of how water can glisten like diamonds sparkling on the sea? Close to where Lucille grew up the indigenous people of Nova Scotia the Mi'kmaq named a bay Waspageek meaning shining place because of the way the water glistens like a mirror. Waspageek actual means shining place where the seals gather. This introduction to today's gospel can serve to point us to where true wealth is to be found as Jesus teaches.

Jesus has been teaching beyond the Jordan in a region known as the Decapolis, home to ten Greek cities that had been planted there. There a man comes to him possibly a convert and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. The use of the word inherit is striking suggesting as the man is young that he has inherited his wealth. A wealth described a little later as consisting of many possessions.

Again as is my wont I want us to appreciate details of this episode. The man runs up to Jesus and kneels before him. He addresses Jesus as Good Teacher. Mark a little earlier (Mark 10.1) has introduced this section writing, "Jesus left that place and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan. And crowds again gathered around him; and, as was his custom, he

again taught them.” Jesus teaches his followers in today’s gospel about where true wealth is to be found.

Let’s return to the movement and the emotions of this episode. The man kneels before Jesus. He asks his question. Jesus answers by first asking him a question in return. “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” Let me rephrase that. You young man know that God alone is good. Why are you calling me good, when you know the commandments and the necessity of keeping them? Jesus is not saying that he is not good, but he is pointing out, however subtly that addressing him as good points to God alone. Addressing Jesus as good requires not only an intellectual response, it also requires concrete action. In the case of the rich young man a major shift in his relationship to his inheritance, to possessions, to wealth. With last Sunday’s gospel still ringing in my mind I recall what Jesus taught quoting from William Tyndale’s translation, “But rather seke ye fyrst the kyngdome of heuen and the rightwisnes therof and all these thynges shalbe ministred vnto you.” To seek the kingdom of heaven and the righteousness thereof requires a reorientation. There is no way around it. Even if we are only taking baby steps. Inching forward a little hopefully day by day aided by asking God’s Holy Spirit to direct and rule our hearts in all things.

Above I spoke of the emotions of this episode and they begin with Mark’s observation. Jesus seeing the man loved him. This is a unique passage as commentators point out with the mention of Jesus’ love for a person who is not one of the disciples or followers. And because Jesus loves the man he makes a diagnosis. In order that the rich young man inherit eternal life he must sell all that he has and give it to the poor, then his treasure will be in heaven and then come follow him. Note how Jesus answers the man’s question. The answer given is not the one he wanted to hear. It was not pleasing. The rich young man’s reaction is one of shock and grief for he had many possessions. From a worldly point of view he has much to lose. Again in words taken from Matthew’s gospel in the Tyndale translation, “What shall it proffet a man though he shulde wyne all the whoole worlde: yf he loose his owne soule?” (Matthew 16.26a) From a heavenly point of view he has much to gain.

This takes me back to the phrasing of the question that the rich young man asks. A man who is on the way, as we see by his coming to Jesus and asking him a question. The man perceives Jesus' goodness. He knows that he speaks of eternal things. He speaks of divine things. Jesus will have the answer what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus will know what is required. Remember how the question is framed, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" If my conjecture is right meaning the man inherited his many possessions then it was simply by right. It was by a certain ease. Does the young man think if he keeps the commandments as he is doing this will suffice and that he has already inherited eternal life? That the inheritance of eternal is already his? For him it is a question about doing. And Jesus tells him what he must do. It requires a shift so that in the words of Bruce Coburn he may find diamonds conjured up by wind and sunlight. It will require something of him that will turn his life upside down. His value, his wealth will no longer be in his many possessions. From now on these will be in being a follower of Jesus, who shows a better way or does he?

This encounter brings the disciples back on the scene. Twice in a few sentences we are told that they are taken aback by Jesus teaching just as the rich man was. Jesus' teaching is startling and it remains so. Not easily tamed so that we feel comfortable. When Jesus says, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' the disciples are perplexed at his words. When he says, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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' they are greatly astounded and they ask themselves a question, "Who then can be saved!"

There is a reading of Scripture, of the Bible, that encourages us to believe that riches and wealth are a sign of God's blessing. I am not saying they aren't. They are however often a great hindrance, making us turn away like the rich young man from Jesus in sorrow, as we hear today. And elsewhere in the gospels we have hear the disciples exclaim. This teaching is too hard for us! Wealth isn't simply a matter of black and white. But it must be stated clearly that wealth whatever its dimensions is not a guarantor of God's blessing. Please do

not be deceived. The vulgarity of some of today's so-called Evangelists and church leaders, who acquire for themselves great wealth and private jets to boot with their tenuous and tedious self-justifications is staggering. The excessive spending on personal comfort and material gain supposedly in the service of Christ is disgusting. I am appalled. In saying this, calling out these demons, am I condemning myself? Jesus warns, "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Do not put your trust in your wealth, your riches, but put your trust in Jesus and his teaching, who is our wealth and who is our health. The similarity of these two words conveys a message. Do we hold our wealth whatever its dimensions in such a way that it brings health and wholeness. Take direction from him. Put what you have in the service of Christ as good stewards. Become one of his followers. Use your money to help the poor. Use your money in the service of the Church, as she seeks to mirror the ministry of Jesus today. Our wealth, our blessing is found in sacrifice. It is found in the offering of our lives. This is not always easy. Go the extra mile. Jesus then lists what we shall inherit as followers, by sacrifice brothers and sisters, blessings a hundredfold and tucked in, so easy to miss, persecutions one hundredfold. A young man only the other day told me about committing his life to Christ at the age of 16, which led to him being ostracised by his classmates, but he found companionship amongst brothers and sisters in a Christian youth group...

We are not saved by our works, but by God's grace alone. This is how I read Jesus' response to the disciples this morning when he answers their worries that Jesus has put salvation beyond all of them, "Then who can be saved?' Jesus looks at them and says, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

As I considered this passage that startled the disciples and got them very worried, raising their anxiety level - Was it all for naught? - requiring Jesus' assurances I began to ask myself seeing how Jesus loved the rich young man, "What does my faith look like, I wonder?" I hope and pray that it is heart shaped a little like Jesus' and if it isn't that it may become a little more so day by day. During the writing of this sermon I was reminded of the Shirley Bassey

song, Day by day. I will spare you my own unique rendition. The song is from the musical Godspell and is based on a prayer by the 13th century follower of Jesus Richard of Chichester. Shirley Bassey sings,

Day by day
Day by day
Oh, Dear Lord
Three things I pray
To see thee more clearly
Love thee more dearly
Follow thee more nearly
Day by day

I end with all the lyrics from Bruce Coburn's song with which we set out.

All the diamonds in this world
That mean anything to me
Are conjured up by wind and sunlight
Sparkling on the sea

I ran aground in a harbor town
Lost the taste for being free
Thank God He sent some gull-chased ship
To carry me to sea

Two thousand years and half a world away
Dying trees still grow greener when you pray

Silver scales flash bright and fade
In reeds along the shore
Like a pearl in sea of liquid jade
His ship comes shining
Like a crystal swan in a sky of suns
His ship comes shining