

Homily for people and parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 13th October 2024, Pentecost 21

Readings: Job 23:1-9, 16-17

Psalm 22:1-15

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

A few weeks ago some friends needed help and they asked Kate and I to work with them on something because the people they'd arranged to work with them had become unavailable. We worked hard for six and half hours and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. In response they offered to pay us for the time, but we declined because we were happy to be part of making something work really well. A few weeks later these friends unexpectedly sent a gift of some bottles of wine as a thank you which was lovely of them... but, was not needed.

I think there is a transactional element hard-wired into us to such a degree that we may feel uncomfortable being indebted to another. In an economic sense we pay money for goods and services and the ledger is balanced. However, when somebody does something for us, there may be a sense from them that at some stage we can be called upon to do something for them, and within us there can be a sense that we owe them. Anthropologists call this 'mutual reciprocity', and to a certain extent that's how we operate as human beings.

I was reminded of this assumption when reading about the encounter between a rich young man and Jesus in today's Gospel. For the young man asked Jesus what he had to DO to inherit eternal life. I get that – and I think most of us would – because we live in a transactional world. What did that young man have to DO, to be granted eternal life? What do you and I think we have to DO... to obtain eternal life?

The young man was already DOING plenty of things, because we're told that he had kept ALL the Commandments since he was a boy. So... what more did he have to DO?

Unsettlingly, and with great compassion, Jesus replied, '*...sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and... follow me.*'

You possibly have an alarm bell ringing now, because you are worried that I will suggest we each have to do the same: sell what we own, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus.

However, Jesus did not give this direction to everyone he met. There is no record of him saying to the disciples, or the crowds that came to him: 'sell what you own... and follow me!' It appears to have been a specific message for the young man because Jesus had intuited that he loved money above all other things. The Gospel tells us that the young man went away grieving 'because he had many possessions.' However, it is not clear whether he grieved because he was ready to sell and was sad about letting them go, or that he grieved because he was not prepared to sell. We are simply told that he went away grieving. The inference is that he preferred his wealth to being in the company of Jesus.

This is where the alarm bells should start ringing, because the Gospel challenges us to think about what we consider most important in life. Further, what are the things we value more highly than faith? It could be how much money we earn, or, what we own; how much influence we have, or, the relationships we have with our family. It could be how we appear to others, or, the particular hobby that gives us energy... What are the most important things in life for you and me? And, how does our love of God fit in with them?

One way for us to explore this would be to list the five things we consider most important, and then consider how much time we spend each week on them? If we spend one hour each week in church, and two hours each week cleaning the car... is there something to think about? If we spend one hour a week in church and don't pray or think about God at any other time... is there something for us to think about?

Maybe we've misunderstood God's grace, or taken it for granted? Maybe we've embraced the understanding that through Christ we are somehow made right with God, and there's nothing we have to DO, other than be thankful?

Personally, I think thankfulness is a helpful way to frame our place in the world... for we often take things for granted until something goes wrong! We can take our ability to breathe for granted... until we develop asthma or, someone we love contracts pneumonia! We can take our heart's ability to pump blood for

granted... until we have a heart attack! We can take our spine for granted... until it becomes injured, and we can't dress ourselves! We can even take our spouses, children, and friends for granted... until something goes wrong in those relationships? We can even take God's love for granted until our faith seems like a dry and distant thing, to be reached for only in times of crisis.

As we consider the challenge that Jesus gave the rich young man before inviting him to follow, we might recognise the challenge not to limit our engagement with God to worship on a Sunday morning but make it an everyday, whole of life engagement. Not limit our prayers of gratitude to the sacred space of a church but recognise the things we can be grateful for each day. Even, the presence of God's Spirit with us in each breath.

I think the call from Christ to follow – is a call to journey with God's Spirit and find identity and purpose. The rich young man in the Gospel recognised that there would be a cost in responding to the call and appears to have been unwilling to let go of the priority he gave to other things. What about you and me?

As we consider this, would you please join me in prayer:

God of journey and call, we give thanks for the gift of our lives, and your love. Through your Spirit help us to recognise you in the midst of each day, love you in the midst of each moment, and follow you in the complexity of daily living. We pray in the name of Christ, who shows us the way. Amen.