

## 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year 2021

### Mark 10:17-30

*Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him  
“You lack one thing.”* Mark 10:21

This morning’s readings offer us one of my favourite combinations in all three years of the lectionary. One can almost imagine the persons of the Trinity chatting over a heavenly coffee: it’s the beginning of the university year, says the Father, better choose these carefully. The Holy Spirit, mindful of its frequent association with the Greek word Sophia - gets in there straight away: let’s have something on wisdom and its value as the highest of all gifts. So the angelic admin assistant types in Wisdom chapter 7. And then the Son – the logos – puts his two penneth in: OK, you can have wisdom, but only if I can have something about the Word. How about Hebrews 4? And the celestial scribe writes that down as well. Then the Father, fed up with the other two bickering about who proceeds from whom, thinks the co-eternal youngsters need

taking down a peg or two, and so hits them with the story of the rich young man: however good you think you are, there's still something missing.

Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him "You lack one thing." The young man comes to Jesus full of eagerness to please. His excitement is genuine, he is engaged by Jesus' presence, his enthusiasm is not a substitute for but a vehicle of his sincerity, which is proven in his unblinking obedience to the law. That ought to be enough for him, but it clearly isn't. His question continues to bother him - what must I do to inherit eternal life? He's not satisfied by the traditional answer Jesus gives - you know the commandments, keep them. I've done all that, the young man says. He wants some further test or measurement, and so he is given an instruction - go and sell all that you have. Deliberate hyperbole is at work. The demands of the kingdom can't be met by ticking boxes - there is no manageable set of tasks which we can overcome in order to inherit eternal life.

To make this point, Jesus demands of him that which he knows this young man is not able to give.

We are told that before Jesus gives the young man his answer, he looked upon him and loved him. This is the only such occasion in the whole gospel. It is not that Jesus does not love those he encounters, how could we interpret his healing presence, his transformation of those he meets, in any other way? But here the evangelist wants us to pause and hold that image. Jesus looks upon him and loves him, and we will not understand what follows unless we remember that detail. Because what follows is not wisdom, not learning, but failure.

The man has been given the answer to his question, has received the wisest of all guidance, and instead of acting upon it, goes away sadly. The option which Jesus presents, is simply not an option for him. He is asked to accept that all of his achievement, all of his obedience to the law, all of his wealth and possession, are actually not achievement, not riches, but failure.

He who is so successful has his success exposed as empty. And that is too much to bear. Only here, throughout the gospel stories, only here do we the direct call of Jesus directly ignored.

Jesus loves the young man enough to tell him the truth. You lack one thing. The verb lack here – *hysterein*, in Greek – appears in one of the most famous of all Biblical verses, the beginning of Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd, therefore can I lack nothing. Those few familiar words contain a great deal. If the Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. And what is nothing? It is that which is not created by God. If I lack nothing, I am without the emptiness, the pride, the self-obsession which is contrary to the will of God. If on the other hand I lack one thing, then what I lack is something real, something which is created by God, something which is the product of the love which holds all things in being.

To lack nothing in this context does not mean to have everything, it means to be without that which is not of

God. Its opposite is to lack one thing, to lack anything. In the case of the rich young man, the one thing he lacks is what he believes to be nothing, but is actually everything – it is the self-giving love which Jesus personifies, which defines the life of God and the reality of human existence. But the young man's definitions are those of the world, those of wealth and power and achievement. And so because he does not lack nothing, because he lacks one thing, the truth is that in the end he lacks everything.

The young man is asked to unlearn what he thought he knew. Jesus instructs him to sell everything he has. This is not because his material wealth is bad in itself. If it were, he would tell the young man to destroy his material wealth. But he doesn't, he tells him to sell it and give to the poor. It's not a case of spiritual triumphing over material, so much as another challenge to our notion of discipleship and learning. The true wisdom of which the Bible speaks is contrasted with the riches of this world because it contradicts the expectations of earthly thinking about

what might truly be of value. To gain the wisdom of Israel – to line up one’s thinking with the way of the Lord – is to realise that so much of what the world prizes and panders to is – like the possessions of the rich young man – actually something which obstructs the gift of wisdom, comes between us and a right relationship with God. In order truly to learn, we need first to un-learn, to understand that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and the light of true learning shows up all else for all its uselessness. It’s no accident that one of the profoundest theological essays on the knowledge of God is called the Cloud of Unknowing. We need to un-learn, before we can learn, to un-know our false ideas of God and the world, in order to begin to know the truth. This unlearning, this beginning of true wisdom, will require us to confront the words of Jesus: you lack one thing. We all lack one thing – true knowledge of God – because we are all, in our many different ways, held back by something – wealth, power, sex, knowledge, violence, envy, fear, deceit. These are the worldly things we have, and they are the reasons that every one of us lacks one thing.

So here we are, men and women old and young, in a city which prides itself on its wisdom and basks in its wealth. If we don't find the words of Jesus discomfiting, then we're obviously not listening. The rich young man goes away sadly – his puppy dog face falls from child-like eagerness to gloom and despair - knowing that the demands of discipleship are beyond him. But if only he had sought true wisdom, if only he had dared to walk in the way of Christ, his might have been a different story. The challenge for each of us is clear: the more we think we have, the more persistently we will lack until we learn the lesson of the cross: that true riches, true wisdom, can be ours, not because of all the things we have to lose, but because of the everything which there is in Christ to gain.