

Bennochy church: 14th October 2018

They say that good leaders ask good questions, rather than always trying to give answers. I think that is true. What lies behind the question is more important than the answer. So, if you are asked a good question, how do you respond? Let's take the example of the politician. Most politicians, will give the answer they want their audience to hear, no matter whether it answers the question or not. The question becomes irrelevant, and they will persist in giving 'their' answer, much to the annoyance of the person doing the interview. Another tactic is to respond with another question. *"Well, what do you think about that?"*. Its good for covering up our ignorance, though sometimes better just to admit that, or, maybe, you are trying to draw the answer out of the person who is asking the question. It's true that very often the answer lie within us.

The bible is full of stories of controversy and questioning. Jesus interacts with the crowd, often taking on his arch rivals, the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees. At the root of the controversy, lies a different interpretation of the laws of God and Mark chapter 10 is no different. And one of the tactics used by the religious leaders was to deliberately try and trick Jesus. They wanted to get him to say something that they could then accuse him, of breaking the law. I don't think that is the case of the rich man, but he does ask a very good question, *"Good Teacher"*, interesting title, it's certainly respectful. Does

this give us an indication of how this man sees Jesus? I think it is a genuine question *"What must I do to receive eternal life?"* In ancient Israel it was important what you 'did'.

The first thing that Jesus does is to get the word 'good' out of the way. In relation to the substance of the question, it is irrelevant, for only God is good. The second thing he does, is to ask a question; *"you know the commandments"* and then goes on to quote some of the 10 commandments. You can't get any more orthodox than that; so if any religious leaders were listening in, they weren't going to catch Jesus out. His answer, to the point and straight down the party line. *"You know the commandments."*

It seems to be going well. To far so good. The rich man says, I have always done that. I have always kept the commands. An impossible task, but let's give him the benefit of the doubt, he was probably doing his best. And note which commands Jesus quotes. They don't mention God. Is duty to mankind easier than duty to God? As a 1st century Palestinian Jew, would our answer be very different? Probably not.

Now, imagine if you can, Jesus looks straight at you. His eyes fixed on yours. Ignore the crowds. Block out the noise. This encounter is between Jesus and ourselves. No one else. In love,

he says to the rich man, there is just one more thing you need to do. Just the one. Hear the words of Jesus

"Jesus looked him hard in the eye—and loved him! He said, "There's one thing left: Go sell whatever you own and give it to the poor. All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. And come follow me."

²² The man's face clouded over. This was the last thing he expected to hear, and he walked off with a heavy heart. He was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go."
(Mark 10: 21-22, The Message)

Jesus is not just talking about money. If we believe we are not wealthy, and that at best is a relative term, we might read this story and play the opt out card and say, this is not relevant to me. Forget the wealth. What Jesus says applies to all of us. Jesus is here making a point. Sacrifice is about what is left not what is given. That is where trust in God begins.

The question behind the question is this; what is the basis upon which we will build our lives? For this man, his riches were the barrier to faith. He failed the test and walked away sad. If, we asked to give up something that is important to us, what would our answer be to the question? The context is different, but the question remains the same.

We have been listening in the story, this encounter, so have the disciples. Their lives for three years must have been some rollercoaster! Imagine what they witnessed. Here, they are

shocked or exasperated or maybe indignant by what Jesus said to the rich man. Think what they had already given up. If it is going to be that difficult, who then will be saved? Maybe in response, our question is the same?

We all have 'riches' and here Jesus is saying the Kingdom of God is a difficult place to get into. It is like trying getting a camel through the eye of the needle! Jesus uses a metaphor of sheer impossibility. Yet, picture the scene at one of the gates of Jerusalem. It is called the eye of the needle, a low gate only opened after the main gate was closed at night. A camel could only pass through this smaller gate if it was stooped and had its baggage removed. Just one possible interpretation. Difficult, but not impossible. Jesus says, with God all things are possible, even giving up the things we find hard to do.

Some has suggested that Peter is jealous. You get the impression here is a man with a temper. Peter who declared Jesus as Messiah; who jumped out of a boat in the middle of a storm; who three times denied Jesus, he says to him, is that not what we have already done?

As he often did, Jesus finishes by turning everything upside down. To Peter, the crowd, to us, he says, the first will be last and the last will be first. It was the rich man who kept the commands of God who went away sad and it was the disciples, who continued of the journey of faith and who followed Jesus. Amen.