

## Sermon for 10.10.21: Mark 10: 17-31 *Giving everything, gaining all* – Rev Lin Vawer

I'm not sure whether anyone here has ever been a professional salesperson but I expect that like me you have been approached by one. In the days of being able to go into a store, particularly at Christmas time, at the till I was always offered the possibility of taking home a teddy bear or the like for just a small additional cost.

It's been suggested that to be a successful salesperson you need three things – first a snappy slogan, then an attractive offer or product and then a good price. So: "make a friend for life. Just look at this cute teddy and its yours for just for a tenner". Colin was always proud that I resisted the teddy bear – offer another product it may have been a different story, mind you and I could have eaten the evidence on the way home.

Jesus wasn't a salesperson, but he was in the business of attracting and gently persuading people. If we do think of him as a salesperson for just one second, we could say that he was brilliant in the first two requirements.

He had the **slogan**: "the kingdom of God is at hand", he held out the **offer** of entering that kingdom, the promise of living in a new and just world, forgiven and free, at one with the creator. But the third requirement, a good price, I think it's fair to say that he that he failed.

In the previous verses we have heard Jesus say "***I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.***" The price appears to be complete loss of power. Who is going to pay that? And today he tells his disciples "***How hard it is for the rich 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.***" It certainly is a steep price to pay. No wonder the disciples were aghast, his followers weren't rich themselves and according to Peter they had indeed left everything to follow Jesus. For the man in today's reading the price was too high.

Taking a step in to the future can be difficult- getting ready to go to school for the first time, going out on a first date, changing jobs, moving house, selling all we have and following Jesus. That last example was the step into the future that Jesus recommended for the young man, who we later find out is wealthy. He is a "ruler" in Luke and "young" in Matthew and in Christian tradition we often refer to him as "the rich young ruler". But for Mark he is just a normal person, although he has great wealth.

This man, perhaps thinking he has everything else asks "***Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?***" and Jesus, being Jesus, turns the question back "what have you done so far?" The man has kept the commandments since he has been a boy and in his own way Jesus gives on a pat on the back - "great but this is what you need to do now". His captivity to possessions prevent him from living life to the full and so Jesus names the power and invites him to step into freedom. The cost is high "***sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.***" It's a step too far, a cost too high and this man walks away from his future.

And what about the disciples who are amazed and then even more amazed with Jesus' response. What of the cost for them and their future?

In this section of Marks gospel people come to Jesus with all sort of questions – "is it lawful for man to divorce his wife?", "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" and in every case Jesus reforms the question in terms of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God and the new behaviour that is required. In most cases the disciples just do not understand. Typically Jesus has to explain or share another parable with the dense disciples to help them understand. Interestingly in this case they understand enough to be able to ask "***Who then can be saved?***". They change

kingdom language to the language of being saved but at least they recognise the difficulty of stepping into the future.

The disciples have just seen a painful moment for the wealthy man who leaves sadly (the Message translation uses the words he leaves with “a heavy heart”) We assume it is sadness because he is unwilling to let go of everything and follow Jesus. Another possibility is that he went away because he made the opposite decision, he had decided to sell everything and follow Jesus. A bold action which would not have been emotionless. A decisive step into the future, resulting in an emotional letting go of all that he had and the relationships that came with his possessions. Either way the disciples are privy to how just how painful the steps to the future can be. The kingdom of God is unfolding but joining Jesus in kingdom activity and behaviour is not easy and often it is excruciatingly painful. We have the privilege of knowing that in the painful times and the joyous ones that follow, the disciples had stepped into their future, they took the step to keep following and though they didn’t always get it right they stripped themselves of everything and followed that call to come and follow.

There leaves a question for us .....how literally should we take this?

In third-century Egypt a young man called Anthony heard this same story read in his church. That same day he gave away all his belongings and went into the desert to live as a hermit, working with his hands, facing his demons and inadvertently becoming the founder of Christian monasticism. A thousand years later a young man called Francis did something similar in Assisi. They realised what the man in the gospel found too hard to accept. That what Jesus calls the “rule of God” or “eternal life” isn’t just a matter of keeping commandments or living a virtuous life. It means stripping away everything and anything away that we put in place of Gods rule of universal love and justice.

How literally should we take this?..... well I’m not suggesting that we sell everything we have or consider a monastic life but I think it probably does mean a radical decluttering of anything that comes between us and God and our future. For the man in the gospel, it was his wealth. Jesus doesn’t see this would be disciple who fails at the last hurdle as a bad person, he has been faithful many ways. He doesn’t condemn him but confronts his weakness. We cannot dismiss Jesus radical and somewhat harsh words to him but this is where we need to hold the command and God’s grace together. **“Jesus looked at him and loved him.”** He loved him.

This is a text of both challenge and possibility, for hope is given to us. When the disciples exclaimed **“Who then can be saved?”**. Jesus responds with hope. **“With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”** Those foggy minded disciples had finally understood something: just how hard it is to change and to live kingdom ethics.

We may be being asked to confront our weakness. For us it may be career or popularity, for each it will be different. I know what my weakness is, do you? But by God’s grace life in the kingdom of God allows for new behaviour, new first steps. It is about transformation and character change, not business as usual. Being in the company and presence of Jesus is a good first step. Transformation begins with our response to **“come, follow me”** and though it may be a slow process, it also a relational process. Nestled and nurtured in the company of believers, we are enabled to take the first steps into new behaviour.

Jesus is not a salesman trying to cajole or trick us or profit from us. He loves us and desires our healing and friendship but refuses to coerce and is honest about the potential cost. First steps are hard but the good news is ..... Jesus looks at us and loves us and he holds out the hope that with God not only are first steps possible but are already happening, it is the word of hope that says **“all things are possible with God.”**