

PENTECOST 20B, 10-10-2021 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Job 23.1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22.1-15; Hebrews 4.12-16; Mark 10.17-31

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother."' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, '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 were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.' Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

Mental Health Week began yesterday on October 9th and Anti-Poverty Week begins next Sunday. There are connections between the two, because people who struggle with mental illness can easily fall into poverty and homelessness- compounding their suffering.

Our first reading from the Bible today is about suffering- continuing the story of the suffering of Job, who has lost everything. Job cries out to God: "Where are you, God?" He wants his day in court, to plead his case and tell God that his torment is unjust because he has always been a good man.

The book of Job wrestles with the problem of human suffering in relation to God's justice, asking the eternal questions: Why do innocent people suffer? Why do children suffer? Where is God when disaster and war and cancer and COVID-19 are all around? There is a sense in which to live is to suffer, and people have always tried to make sense out of it and to find reasons for it.

Arguing with God, as Job did, may seem a bit disrespectful, but it can be an act of deep faith.

Deciding that God cannot exist because of the existence of suffering might be easier than confronting the challenge and being willing to wrestle with it.

Psalm 22 is familiar to us: we read it on Good Friday, because the words of Jesus on the cross echo the words of this psalm. It is a heartbreaking cry of despair and forsakenness; like Job, this sufferer feels deserted by God and utterly alone.

Many people can identify with this feeling of being alone in their suffering. At a time when a sense of the nearness of God would bring great comfort, we can feel the opposite- unable to find God, unable to pray, hardly able to believe that God cares.

Because Jesus used these words as he was dying on the cross, we know that human suffering has been taken into the very being of God. The experience of Jesus the man means that God understands and knows how it feels for us.

Some suffering is obvious to others: if you walk with a limp, or have scars or dressings, people can see that there is something wrong. But much suffering is invisible. Many people live with chronic pain- which may be physical, emotional or both; and many live with the pain of broken relationships, or grief, or the effects of trauma. I imagine there are as many ways to suffer as there are ways to be human. People bear many different burdens that cause them pain: too much money, too little money, too much responsibility, unemployment, increasing incapacity due to age, loneliness- all can be as hard or harder to bear than the suffering of physical illness.

The letter to the Hebrews points us towards God, reminding us that God knows our innermost thoughts and intentions, and encouraging us to approach God for mercy when we are in need.

We can do this because Jesus is able to sympathise with our weaknesses, having experienced suffering himself. We can pray for ourselves and for others and find grace to help. We can pray together and alone, and we can ask our sisters and brothers to pray with and for us.

In our Gospel reading today, the man who approached Jesus to ask a question didn't seem to have been suffering all that much. He asserted that he'd kept all the commandments since he was a boy, and he'd led a good life.

He asked an interesting question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It sounds as though he thinks he must EARN eternal life, yet he calls it an inheritance; you don't *earn* an inheritance, it is a gift.

We are told that Jesus looked at him and loved him. Perhaps he saw in him an earnest desire to serve God; we don't know, but he loved what he saw. So Jesus said the hardest thing to him: "Go and sell everything, give the money to the poor, and then come and follow me."

The man was understandably shocked. We don't know whether he eventually obeyed or not; but Jesus observed to his disciples how hard it is for wealthy people to enter God's kingdom and used the memorable image of the camel and a needle's eye.

Jesus could see that, for this person, money and possessions were a hindrance to his life. He was held captive by wealth and needed to be free so he could live as a disciple and find his true security in God.

Jesus was not making another law; he was not saying to every Christian that we must give away everything we have. He was pointing out that having too much is not only a burden and a distraction that will have an impact on our relationship with God, but that we have a responsibility to feed the poor and care for others.

A colleague recently wrote this:

"We in the church, those who call ourselves Christians, seem to spend a lot of time worrying about morality: understandably as we are called to live lives of personal holiness and goodness toward our neighbours.

But we are often so focused on what happens in people's bedrooms between consenting adults that we have utterly ignored what happens in boardrooms around the world that have had devastating consequences for the whole world but most particularly for the poorest of the poor.

It is interesting that the church, just like the rest of the world, tends to pay more heed to matters of human sexuality than to matters of material wealth. And yet for every verse of Scripture relating to sexual behaviour there are nearly a hundred referring to our material wealth and our relationship to material things." *

How sad is it that what is currently causing controversy and division between members of the Anglican Church in Australia is not the causes of poverty, the structural inequalities of society, or the generational disadvantages suffered by First nations people, or any number of other issues vital to the well-being of those Jesus told us were our responsibility to care for; no, what threatens our communion is the possibility of priests blessing the civil, legal marriages of non-heteronormative couples.

As the Perth Diocesan Synod continues to meet this weekend, let us pray that we might all focus on what is most important: the teaching of our Lord Jesus. If his priority was that we should love God and love our neighbour, caring for all who are the last, the least, and the lost- may that always be our priority.

The Lord be with you.

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