

SUCH IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Pentecost 20

We have been working our way through Jesus' teachings as reported by the Gospel writers and this morning we have two challenges that he laid down for those that would be his followers. And I must admit to indeed finding them challenging. Each challenge is presented in the form of an event.

So, we have Jesus and children, and the rich young ruler. Both of these events are reported by Mark and Matthew as well as Luke. The descriptions differ in minor ways but otherwise the fundamental message is the same in each case, it is interesting that the material has been filtered through the perceptions of each evangelist in preparing the text.

The first of these events was the reported interaction between Jesus, his disciples and some children. These were presumably brought to Jesus by their mothers for a blessing.

The first thing that happens is that the disciple's step in and stop them. Now we don't know their motives, but two possibilities come to mind. Firstly, they are a bit full of themselves and thought seeing children was a waste of Jesus important time. How often we see this with important figures, their staff have an inflated view of their importance and status. In their view children do not rank anywhere in the scale of important people, or for that matter in the scales against any adult.

To be fair to them they knew that Jesus was flat out, tired and distressed at the coming challenge facing him in Jerusalem and they were taking on themselves to vet those trying to see him. They did not want him bothered - and they knew best.

Hands up those who thought they were being officious, now those who think they were just being concerned. Or maybe a bit of both? It is easy for us to take upon ourselves the decisions that are rightly the choice of others, isn't it? Do we ask what they want, or do we just quietly do it behind their backs? Is it sometimes sensible to do this? I think we all need to review the way we respect others. I certainly need to.

Now we turn to Jesus' response. The wording in different translations varies: Jesus was vexed, or he rebuked them. The Message has Jesus saying: '*Don't come between them and me.*'!

I do not think I would want to be the subject of a sharp rebuke like this from Jesus!

This story tells us a great deal about Jesus, doesn't it? He was the kind of person children and their mothers trusted. Clearly he was not a grim ascetic. He could not have been a stern and gloomy and joyless person. Nor floating around with his head in the clouds. He must have smiled and laughed easily with the kids. Are our connections to people ones that lead to openness, or do we take life all a bit too seriously?

I think we need to remember this side of Jesus when we pray or reflect on our relationship with him. Do we ever laugh with Jesus about something or are we always deadly serious, with the emphasis on the deadly! I am sure he must get bored with all these serious, earnest interactions. Do you think he might say once in a while '*Oh come on, lighten up, its hot let's go and get a beer!*'

I can imagine myself as a small child going for a walk with Jesus. I would be filled with enthusiasm, rush back to show him things I have found. But now I am a very serious grown-up person what do I do instead? Surprisingly, as a working scientist I do the same thing; poking my nose into all the mysteries of this world and taking what I have discovered to show him with much excitement. And

to see his sharing smile and pleasure at it all. I hope you have ways to share with him too. A quilt just made, a journey planned, whatever. If not, why not give it a try!

As the Gospel writers report: Jesus says; '*for of such behaviour is the kingdom of heaven made*'.

I think it is really important for us not to forget this side of our very human Lord.

If we now turn to the second story, that of the rich young ruler. Each of the three gospel writers describe him slightly differently. In Luke he is a ruler, Matthew as young while in Mark he is a man who came running up to Jesus and threw himself at his feet. So, someone filled with enthusiasm!

And he asks, '*Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*' And first, Jesus pulls him up saying '*Why do you call me good ? No one is good but God alone!*' There is an important lesson here for each of us in the way we behave towards one another isn't there? He was refusing to be put on a pedestal. He was trying to give this man, so filled with enthusiasm, a proper sense of proportion - we can talk and share with someone, but only if we and they see us as on an equal footing. It is one thing to talk sensibly to someone, but an entirely different thing to get alongside them. It is so tempting when someone puts us on a different, higher plane to them, though it is nice and proper for our gifts or skills to be organised, and accept the resulting respect. However if we want to get along-side someone we have to get off this pedestal and walk with them as a brother or sister. You cannot lead people to God whilst standing on a pedestal.

Jesus then begins to move the guy's perceptions in the right direction. And it comes in the form of a question. The man asks: *what must I do to be saved?* And for Jesus the big issue he has been working towards is found in the little phrase 'what must I do?

The man is searching for eternal life. He is searching for happiness, for satisfaction, for peace with God. But his very way of phrasing it betrays him '*What must I do?*' He is thinking in terms of things he needs to do. As a Jew he is thinking in terms of keeping rules and regulations. He is thinking of piling up a credit balance with God by acting accordance with the law. He clearly has not heard the good news of grace, of the graciousness of God toward all. But then of course it is not just people coming with a Jewish perspective who ask how do I organise my way into heaven? '*What must I do?*'!

This reflects his deep heartfelt question; One we all ask, But the way the question is phrased shows he is on the wrong track. What must I do? It is the difference between right and wrong ideas about the way to God.

Jesus starts to lead him forward in understanding by first raising the human oriented part of the Ten Commandments They are the commandments which govern our duty to others. The young man says he has kept these commandments since his youth, but he still feels something is missing.

Note that these are mostly in the negative form; you shall not ... Without hesitation the young man says I have kept them all. I never did anyone any harm' But the real question is; "Not what harm have you avoided but what good have you done?" With all your possessions, with all your wealth, what positive good have you done to help others?

And Jesus then leads the young man on to this next step. Jesus confronts him with one of the fundamental realities of his life, his position and riches, challenging him by saying '*One thing you lack. sell what you have and distribute it to the poor.*' And suddenly the shocked fellow is confronted

with the true centre of his life. The idol he truly worships if you like. Until this time he probably does even realise it, happily living his comfortable life thinking it was his religion that came first. But now he realises; it doesn't!

We each have our own idols that we cling too. Money, family, position, our phone, whatever, and sooner or later God, through the Spirit, will challenge us to choose: who or what comes first in our lives.

Unfortunately, my experience with God has shown me that I have many idols, and, one by one, I am being asked to put these things in their right place in my life. It may mean giving them up or reordering their priority and importance. I think we are probably brought to these challenges one by one as we go along. And God works with each of us asking the question that is relevant to us at that time and then through the Spirit, enabling us to do what we must. Each of us is faced with our own personal idols to be surrendered to God's graciousness and our own growth. What idol is the Spirit bringing to your mind at present?

If we are to walk in joy, pleasure, and trust with the Lord, we must look to those things that ruin the spontaneity, the completeness, of our relationship. Together the two challenges in today's Gospel ask us to work with God to do this hard task and to take pleasure in the result.