

'Living God's Future Today' a sermon based on Job 23:1-9 and 16-17, Hebrews 4:12-16 and Mark 10:17-31 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 10 October 2021.

The Bible readings we usually use at Knox are selected by an international ecumenical body and they are repeated every three years. The gospel reading today comes up at some of the most inconvenient times for me. When we were in Australia, it came up when our organisation was giving for our use a new car, a very nice new car. To bring the message home, when we went to pick up the car, the letters on the numberplate were s-i-n. And then this week, we were meeting with an advisor about our finances, and what do you know? Here is the passage again. An inconvenient passage. But there is no time that this gospel is convenient.

In the face of this text we need to be honest and realistic. I have not yet met a person who on the basis of my preaching on this gospel has sold what they own and given the money to the poor. I have read about people who have done it. I know about St Francis of Assisi. I have read about people who have done it in part.

Now there was a time in my past, where like other preachers I tried to smooth out the message. There was a period when it was said that the needle was the name of a gate in the Jerusalem wall and camels had to bend low to go through it, so it is really about humbling ourselves and our money before God. Sorry, there was no gate called a needle. I was wrong.

The Bible treats economic issues as theological issues. In the gospel today, Jesus puts together economic life and eternal life. Not something an economist might expect. And yet just last week economist and theologians met in conference to talk about de-growth, how can we develop an economy that takes from the earth only as much as it produces and not more.

A man comes to Jesus with a genuine inquiry. He is a person of stature, distinguished, wealthy, reputable and thoughtful, and he was asking the right questions. The disciples must have been pleased. They might have thought ... how good it was that the Jesus movement had reached this status that such people would be approaching Jesus. The man was the kind of person you want on the board – financial nous, solid reputation, asking the right questions. Here was a prospect for lifting their movement beyond the poor agitators of Galilee to the reputable citizens of Jerusalem.

How disappointed the disciples must have been. Jesus blew his chances with a blunt advice “Sell what you own and give the money to the poor”, he said to the man. O Jesus, could you not have toned it down a bit, treated him more sympathetically, led him along more gently?

Let’s look more closely. The man was polite. He knelt before Jesus. He called him good, a very rare compliment of the time. The man was using flattery, and in the culture of the time, one compliment like that required a similar response. The lack of a similar response immediately creates tension and awkwardness. Jesus gave him the first clue that this was more than a polite conversation. “Only God is good”, Jesus says. And if only God is good, and Jesus does not want to take that quality for himself, then think about yourself, he is saying to the man. But the man is so used to respect, he does not pick up the clue.

When asking his question, the man uses a verb with which he is very familiar. We learn later that he is wealthy, that he had many possessions. The way people gained wealth in the time of Jesus was through acquiring land. So it is natural for him to use the word “inherit”, because that is how he acquired land. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”. Poorer people did own land, but they were very vulnerable, vulnerable to Roman taxes that were as high as 50%, vulnerable to the vicissitudes of farming and vulnerable to treatment in the hands of people who lent them money. Lenders would put pressure on the poor landowners until they could not pay. They would then foreclose the debt and acquire the property. Landowners represented the most politically powerful social group.

Although this was legal, Jesus seems to regard it as fraud. Because there is another clue here. When Jesus is listing the commandments, he slips in one that is not in the ten commandments. “You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal ... And then “you shall not defraud.”

So we have awkwardness instead of social convention. We have direct challenge when the man thinks he has done all that is needed. But there is another surprise here. Before the challenging words are spoken Mark says ... “Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said – “You lack one thing, go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor ...”

This is the only time in the whole of the gospel of Mark that Jesus is recorded as loving someone. Not to say he didn’t love others, but this is the only time it is recorded. But it was tough love because, I assume, he could see that the man was trapped. He had reached a certain social status. He had acquired land fairly in

terms of the economic system of the time, although Jesus saw it as fraudulent. He thought he had lived a good life and he thought that he could inherit eternal life, just as he had inherited all his other possessions. Jesus looked at him and loved him.

It adds to the poignancy of the note “When the man heard what Jesus said, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” In the Greek, it says he slinks away. I imagine he was dispirited and discouraged. It is too much to ask of him.

Ched Myers suggests the man was addicted to the economic system of the day that privileged him. He speaks of how our society suffers from the same addiction. We have come to believe that the way we live is the only way to live. While we can see that the economic system divides our world and divides our nation, we live as if it is the only model. If we wonder how the economy divides, look at the differing rates of vaccination between central Auckland and Murupara. And so as the man in the story, we have come to depend on what is wrong.

This is not a story about Jeff Bezos or Bill Gates or any other billionaire. Nor is it a story aimed to generate guilt, leaving us immobilised or argumentative - “how dare you question me?” It is a story of tough love that seeks to make an intervention in the man’s life and in our life, because what Jesus has in mind is the reign of God, and the reign of God has an economy that enables everyone to flourish. And he wants us to live into that reign of God, that future God brought in Jesus. He wants us to live that future now.

Can we imagine a world in which there is no rich or poor? Can we imagine a nation like that? Can we imagine a nation without the economic divide that followed how land was inherited from the first peoples of this land? We are called to keep wrestling with this.

Jesus loves the rich and the poor, and he sees their flourishing as happening together in community where people together receive a hundredfold and with it, eternal life.

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