

*like a little child*  
a sermon preached on the  
*twentieth sunday after pentecost*  
27 October 2019  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by the reverend colleen clayton*

The lections: Jeremiah 14: 7-10, 19-22; Psalm 84; 2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18; Luke 18: 15-30.

It has been said, *Money can't buy happiness, but it can make you awfully comfortable while you're being miserable.*

In 2010, Princeton University conducted a study to determine whether or not money can buy happiness and their findings indicated that indeed there is a direct correlation between happiness and wealth, up to a point. That point was \$75,000/year. (Interestingly, a sum that was far greater than the average American annual income at the time.)

People who earned less than \$75,000/year experienced greater stress, the misery of uncertainty about the future, and the inability to feel that they could make life-giving decisions.

There is nothing inherently noble in being poor. People without enough money to meet the demands of basic living have worse health and shorter life expectancy, their children are more poorly educated, and they have less access to the resources that would enable them to change their circumstances. Sometimes they find joy and trust in God, but sometimes they find bitterness and disappointment.

The study found that people who earned around \$75,000/year felt happy. They reported a sense of being fulfilled, able to contribute to society and to make positive life choices without having to be particularly focussed on money.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the study, however, was that people who earned more than \$75,000/year did not become even more happy. Some actually became less happy as they felt the pressure to maintain or increase their income, as they doubted the motivations of friends and as they worried about losing their wealth.

It seems likely that the rich ruler in today's Gospel reading had money that put him into a bracket well above the equivalent of \$75,000/year. Having asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus tells him to sell all that he owns and distribute the money to the poor so that he will have treasure in heaven. When he hears this, the rich young ruler becomes very sad; for he is very rich. Thanks, he says, but although money can't buy happiness, it can make you awfully comfortable while you're being miserable. I would rather keep my money and be sad than give it away and follow you.

This is a challenging reading for all of us who live here in prosperous Camberwell, holding together the reality that we have more than enough to meet our needs, alongside our desire to inherit eternal life. There can be a very real tension between focussing on earthly riches and working to store up treasures in heaven.

Of course, just as poverty is not inherently noble, wealth is not inherently base. There are many people who use their wealth and privilege for the greater good of society, making significant contributions to the arts, to research, to education, to philanthropy. Some rich people are enslaved by their wealth, but others hold it lightly, seeing it as a gift from God that enables them to do God's work in the world.

Many of us do not think of ourselves as particularly wealthy. There are bills to be paid and we manage our money carefully, being good stewards of all that we have. And that is important. But living in this time and place, it is very easy to become blind to the actual wealth of our lives.

I am amongst the richest and most privileged of women ever to have lived. I have been well educated, I am entitled to vote, and to hold property in my own name. I have control over my own reproduction. I chose to have two children and they have both lived to adulthood. I can earn money and put it in a bank account in my own name. I can travel independently. I am even allowed to be ordained priest in the Anglican Church!

I have not done anything to deserve these extraordinary privileges. I have certainly worked hard but many of the riches I enjoy are mine simply due to the accident of me having been born a white, middle class woman in Australia in the twenty-first century. I enjoy privileges that many women alive today are still denied and some of my riches come easily to me through the direct suffering of others.

Living inside this culture of privilege can make both its benefits and its inherent injustices invisible. It is easy to hold the view that in some way I have earned my wealth through hard work, virtue, or both. This is one of the more insidious ways in which wealth can shut people off from God's realm. A sense of entitlement produces blindness to the needs of others.

Part of the invitation of this Gospel story is to step outside a world where we take our riches for granted, and value them in a new way. Valuing them and seeing them as the gifts they are invites us to ensure that those gifts do not belong only to us and those like us, but that instead, the riches of our lives are put in the service of God's radical justice.

Jesus' response to the rich ruler tells us that his invitation to discipleship requires more of a commitment than keeping the Ten Commandments. It is not enough to be able to tick off a checklist of things done and not done; even were that possible. Jesus' invitation actually means entering into a relationship with God that takes priority over everything else in life. Existing relationships and possessions must be left behind in order for the disciple to follow Jesus. The rich ruler is unwilling to make this choice and as he stands there in his sadness Jesus says, *How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, 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.*

A real camel passing through the eye of a real needle is, of course, impossible. And that's the point that Jesus is making. People who like to earn and pay for things, who like to be able to hold onto their own precious possessions, cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. To enter into God's realm means to enter a relationship with God in which we make God our absolute, first priority. It is a relationship in which we are called to cast ourselves completely onto God's mercy, to receive God's grace with gratitude, and to direct the energies of our lives to serving God with wholehearted commitment.

Who of us really does that?

The listening crowd obviously wonders the same thing because they ask, *then who can be saved?* Jesus replies, *what is impossible for mortals is possible for God.* It is the generous, extravagant love of God that saves us, never our own efforts and certainly not the things of which we are so proud and that we believe may have allowed us in some way to earn, or at least be worthy of, salvation.

Luke's Jesus, talking to a rich ruler, names the barrier that money creates and asks him to move beyond it in order to enter God's realm. Money is likely to be a relevant barrier for us to consider but I think there are others too at which we can stumble as we make big, and small, choices in life. Come, Jesus says, give up your ..... then come, follow me. Impossible, we say! It would be crazy and irresponsible to give up my; career, stability, security, status, good reputation, convenience, job perks, future plans, success, the expectations of my family. Fill in the blank yourself.

And the really difficult thing is that there is nothing inherently wrong with any of these things. But too often, when we hear Jesus calling to our hearts, when we feel a deep longing to follow for the sake of love, fulfilment, honesty, justice, integrity, generosity, passion, joy, authenticity, the things we believe in, when we desire to enter more deeply into God's realm, we don't because we can't let go. So, we are very sad, because we are very rich.

Immediately before the story of the rich ruler, we heard the story of Jesus welcoming the children, even the infants. *Do not stop them*, Jesus says, *for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs*. In twenty-first century Australia children have, in many ways, become idols. Parents and grandparents wear themselves into frazzles making sure that their precious little cherubs never have to miss out on anything or face anything that is unpleasant, often including the consequences of their actions. It was not so in first century Palestine. Most children in that time and place died before they reached puberty, often before their first birthday, so life for children was fragile and uncertain. Their value lay in their capacity to work alongside their parents, but they had no rights and no power, they could not earn or pay for anything.

Children therefore represent those who know that whatever they receive from God, it comes to them as pure gift. People who are like children enter God's realm easily because they know that they have nothing to lose and everything to gain by receiving God's grace with grateful hearts. People like the rich ruler find it impossible, because all they can see is what they will lose, they are blind to the immeasurable riches they will gain. *Truly I tell you*, Jesus says, *whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it*.

Jesus still offers an invitation to those who are like the rich ruler. *Give up the transactions you do to try to earn or deserve God's love. Stop trying to make others earn God's love. Become like a little child; dependent, grateful, loving. Follow me! Gratefully commit yourself to a relationship with God and enter God's realm of love.*

The Lord be with you.