

CHRIST THE KING, CLAREMONT  
19<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST YEAR 'B'

Sermon by Richard Fuggle  
based on  
**MARK 10:17-31**

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Today's Gospel tells us of a man on a journey to find eternal life. He appears in all three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Matthew tells us he's young. Luke tells us he's a ruler. All three tell us he's rich, and all mention that he wanted advice on what he must do to gain eternal life. Advice that we probably all want—but may not wish to receive.

This man was brave enough to meet Jesus face to face to ask about eternal life.

This Gospel story about eternal life is in three parts:

1. The path to eternal life.
2. The impossibility of humans earning eternal life.
3. The promise of eternal life.

**The path to eternal life (vv. 17-22)**

From funeral orations you might be forgiven for thinking that the only requirement to get to heaven is to die. Why? Because we are invariably told that those who have died have been 'good people'. They had led upright lives, done good, done no harm, and were loved. The assumption seems to be that those who have structured their lives in this way won't be on their way to hell.

That's not what the Bible says. It's not what today's Gospel teaches us. Not all who think they're going to heaven by doing good deeds and obeying the law will get there. We cannot make our own way to heaven through our own actions and by doing good. So back to the example of the rich young man of Mark 10, a man searching for a way into heaven.

He came to the right person, didn't he? And verse 17 shows he came the right way—he ran and knelt before him. He respected Jesus. He was like so many who came to Jesus before, falling at his feet, begging for help. But he comes not for a cure to an illness, nor for an exorcism. He comes for a

different reason. He has a question. “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Like many of us he was spiritually troubled. For all his achievements in life he still sensed he was missing something: what to do to get to heaven. My guess is that many of us have had that thought. We’ve been good people. We’ve followed the rules, obeyed the laws, loved others as best we can. We want to please God, and we want to go to heaven when we die. Yet, there’s a lack, an ache, an uncertainty that we can’t dismiss. In one way or another we also ask the question: “*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*”

It’s easy to think those who have prospered in this world and have achieved wealth and status have no other needs. But this man proves you can have all this world has to offer yet still lack hope. “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus gives him an answer that upset him, and he went away sad and grieving. How did he go from optimism at receiving an answer from Jesus to grieving, so quickly? Here’s how: *he came to Jesus to ask a question, but he wouldn’t follow him to find an answer.* He came to the right person in the right way but wouldn’t follow the advice given because he was looking for something to do, not someone to follow. He wanted to make his own way; he trusted in himself rather than in Jesus.

Like so many others he called Jesus “Good Teacher.” Many people do that. They like Jesus’ example: his morality, his respect for women, loving people, and so on. They respect him as a good teacher, but that’s it. So, Jesus asked why he called him that. Doesn’t he know only God is good? Jesus isn’t saying he isn’t God. He’s testing him. Does he really think he’s a good teacher? Can he still call him that when the answer to his question comes? You can’t call Jesus a good teacher until you’re ready to accept him as God. Was this man ready?

We see soon enough that he isn’t. The young man acknowledges that he has kept all the commandments that Jesus mentions, but he doesn’t recognise that Jesus does not ask him about the first and great commandment, “You shall have no other Gods but me”. The man was not was looking for a relationship with God, he was more concerned about *something* to add to his earthly life—like an advanced degree, or a new, healthy lifestyle. Just add another good worldly activity, get some sleep, and all will be better in the morning.

But Jesus doesn’t work like that. Jesus doesn’t simply point the way to go; Jesus is the way. He’s not an addition—he’s a new start. That’s why Jesus

says it's like being born again. Christianity isn't an add-on; it's a whole new life. If we want eternal life, it comes only through the life God gives us by his Son through his Spirit. We must accept God, surrender to His will for our lives, and not think we can coax Him to accept what we want to do.

Jesus laid out the path before his questioner; "come, follow me". But he couldn't do it. It was too much for him. He was disheartened, sorrowful, grieved. Why? Because he had great possessions. He wanted life abundant but couldn't part with the abundance in his life. When Jesus called this young man to follow him and give up his wealth, the man started to grieve, because wealth was for him what the Father was for Jesus—the centre of his identity. To lose his wealth would have been to lose himself. But that's exactly what Jesus calls us to do. We must lose our love of self to follow Jesus.

The path opened before this young man. The answer to his question was there. And he couldn't accept it. Why? That takes us to the next point.

### **The impossibility of humans earning eternal life (vv. 23-27)**

I hope that the part of the Gospel story we have just considered disturbs you: it should. It's a warning. But it's not the complete story and the second part is also disturbing.

Jesus looked at his disciples and said, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples were puzzled by his words. Riches to them were considered to be a sign of God's blessing: as they are for many people today. How could this man's riches be his problem?

But to indicate that he is not focusing on material wealth Jesus expands his comment. "Children [A comforting form of address], how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! [wealth is not mentioned] It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." And they were exceedingly astonished. They asked, "Then who can be saved?"

You have possibly heard that Jesus might have been referring to a narrow entry gate into Jerusalem called the Eye of the Needle. A camel could get through it, but it had to bend down and squeeze through. It was difficult, but it was possible. Or that there has been an error in transcription. The Greek word *kamelon* (camel) should instead have been written *kamilon* (rope). The Greek words are similar, and it is easier to imagine threading a rope through a needle than having a camel crawl through a small gate.

But neither of these explanations is what I believe Jesus meant. Jesus was using an example of something they knew to be impossible! In today's idiom Jesus might have said, 'It's easier for a Jumbo Jet to land on a cricket pitch;

or, it's easier to fit an elephant into a VW Beetle; or, to put a whale into a gold-fish bowl; than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God'. Jesus was using an example of something his listeners knew was impossible. The camel was the biggest animal in Israel, the eye of a needle was the smallest common opening. A big animal fitting through a tiny hole—**they understood this to be impossible**. But he tells them it is easier for this to happen “than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.”

What is Jesus getting at? He was telling them, and us, that **salvation is impossible for us to accomplish through our own initiative**. No matter how much good we do, we can never gain heaven because of good deeds. It's impossible to squeeze ourselves into heaven. Our best qualities, our most valuable gifts, our most righteous works, amount to nothing compared to God's grace. Our achievements won't and don't buy us a ticket to heaven.

Verse 26 recounts the disciple's reaction: “Who then can be saved?” To which Jesus replies: “**For mortals it is impossible, but not with God. For God all things are possible.**” We need to remember this!

Jesus is our only hope of heaven. The offer Jesus made to the young man was: “Follow me”. But he didn't trust Jesus enough to do so. Do we?

This leads to the third point.

### **The promise of eternal life (vv. 28-31)**

Jesus' response to his wealthy young enquirer made His disciples anxious. Peter says, “See, we have left everything and followed you.” He's saying, “What about us, Jesus? Do we have eternal life because we have followed you?”

Jesus cuts him off. He isn't angry with Peter. He comforts him. Remember Jesus promised the young man “treasures in heaven” (v. 21). But his response to Peter is not only with the treasures to come, but also promises treasures to be enjoyed now; “a hundredfold now in this age” (v.30). The promises of God always have both present and future implications. When we follow Christ, we lack nothing both in this world and the next, no matter how much we give up. We cannot out-give God.

And Jesus doesn't say, “Well, just wait, and you'll get your reward one day.” Though that's true—we hope to receive an inheritance in the life to come that is beyond our imagining—what Jesus says is that we will receive *in this life* far more than what we give up. When we give something up for Jesus, He gives something back to us that is better than whatever we sacrificed. We have a hard time believing that don't we?

Jesus is promising us that eternal life is as real and more abundant with blessings than the life we experience on Earth, and we should look forward to it. The life we have here is weighed down by sin.

Though Jesus saves us and remakes us in his image—if we allow it, we're not fully there yet. We won't be until the resurrection. One day our treasures in heaven will be revealed. As one author put it. "There will be nothing old, dilapidated, impure, or worn out in the radiant kingdom of Christ. We will encounter nothing that has a sad memory associated with it. Everything we experience, every new association and memory, will exponentially increase, purify, and intensify our joy forever, since it all comes from the hand of God."

To conclude. Why was it that the young man was sad and grieving after Jesus had answered his question?

Because he walked away from *Jesus*. ..... But we don't have to!

We need to remember verse 21. "Jesus, looking at him, *loved* him."

We need to remember that Jesus loves us no matter our failings. When we feel we are farthest from God we need to remember that Jesus came to Earth to die to redeem us from our sins.

Nothing in today's Gospel tells us the young man was even aware of Christ's love for him. Are we aware of his love for us? The man thought God was waiting for him to achieve something material, he thought he had to earn heaven by doing something earthly. He had no idea how close he was to the Kingdom. Jesus was there before him, full of gospel love. All he had to do was follow, and life would be abundant in this world and in heaven.

So, how do we get eternal life?

We need to follow Jesus? We need to look to Jesus as the way, the possibility, and the promise.

We need to surrender self-will and place ourselves in His care, following Him in repentance and faith.

It might place us last in this world, but He promises it will make us first in His.

It may seem like He's pushing us away with his call to follow and give up worldly things. His call is hard for sinners like us. But He's not pushing us away. He's offering us heaven, and abundant blessings in this life:

*I pray we will accept His terms and not reject it by demanding acceptance on our own terms. Amen*