

Poverty In Riches  
Mark 10:17-31

I want to start with a question. If the parish covered by Juniper Green were a village of 1000 people who were representative of the parish so had the same mix of people, based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation how many people living in the village would be defined as living as income deprived?

The answer is that 30 people in the parish would be income deprived and be receiving certain benefits or tax credits.

This Wednesday is the United Nations' International Day for the Eradication of Poverty and in Scotland this is marked by Challenge Poverty Week, an annual event organised by the Poverty Alliance, who engage with voluntary organisations, policy makers and politicians in anti-poverty work. This year Challenge Poverty Week ran from 1-7 October and today is Challenge Poverty Sunday is today 14th October. The main aims of the week are to:

- Increase awareness of the reality of poverty in Scotland
- Encourage engagement in positive debate and discussion about poverty
- Highlight what is currently being done to tackle poverty
- Identify solutions to poverty in Scotland

For Challenge Poverty Sunday, every congregation in the country is challenged to look at poverty in their own community. Given that Juniper Green is generally seen as an affluent area - it is amongst the least deprived areas according to the SIMD statistics – it might be easy to think that poverty is not an issue in the parish but as we have seen 3% of the parish are living with income deprivation – and this doesn't include all of those suffering from other forms of poverty such as fuel poverty, so as in any parish in Scotland there are people in our community for whom poverty is an issue. If we look at Edinburgh the level of income deprivation is 9% and throughout Scotland is 11%. This poses a challenge for us as a church as to how we respond to it.

In the passage from Mark that Michael read for us earlier, we meet a man for whom poverty in the way that we would usually think of it is definitely not an issue. This story is also told in Matthew and Luke's gospels, and between the three versions of the story, we learn a lot about this man. In the version we have read in Mark we learn that the man is very wealthy. In Matthew we find out that the man is also young and Luke tells us that he is a ruler – which is why this passage is often referred to as the story of the Rich Young Ruler. By earthly standards, this man had everything you could ask for, he still had his youth and was extremely wealthy and could purchase anything that took his fancy. As well as his fortune he also had power as he was a ruler over others – think Ed Sheeran as President! (If you don't know who Ed Sheeran is, ask a younger person in the congregation). However, despite all that the young ruler has, there is still something that he wants, he wants to have eternal life.

He has heard about Jesus teaching and realises that here is someone who will be able to teach him what he has to do to attain eternal life. You've got to remember where this story is set, in what is now the middle East, so it would have been hot. Also the man would have lived in a culture where things were carried out at a more leisurely pace, so for these two reasons people didn't often run. However this man is so desperate to speak with Jesus that he ran to him and when he reached him he threw himself submissively at his feet. This shows that the young ruler wasn't full of his own self importance – he recognised that despite all of his success and his social standing, he was subservient to this Jewish teacher so fell at his feet to ask him his question – “Good teacher ... what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

It may seem strange that Jesus responds by asking “Why do you call me good?” but in Judaism good meant moral perfection and it would be very rare for a rabbi or religious teacher to be called good as it would have been blasphemous. The way it is written in the original text implies that Jesus is asking “Me? Why do you call me good?” Some commentators, argue that Jesus was telling the man “Don’t use a word that is reserved for God to describe me”. However, others such as Donald English in his commentary, *The Message of Mark*, argue that Jesus may be saying something much deeper “Do you realise the meaning of ascribing to me what belongs to God only? Do you understand how near the truth you are?” Mark knows what the truth is and by asking the question is asking the reader to decide.

Moving onto Jesus’ answer to the young man’s original question - he tells him to keep the old testament commandments to which the young man replies “Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy” and we aren’t given any reason to doubt that this is the truth, that he has lived a moral life according to the Jewish laws. And there is no doubt that in Jesus’ heart there was a great delight that this man had come to him. Mark tells us that “Jesus looked at him and loved him”. The man himself was so impressive, young and having followed the Jewish law, kneeling there at Jesus’ feet, desperate to find an answer to his question, to find out what he needs to do to gain eternal life. However, the word which is translated here as “looked at” means something stronger than just looking at someone, instead meaning that Jesus turned a penetrating gaze on the young man, so that he looked deep into the man’s life and soul and saw what means most to him.

This is why, despite his love for the man – Jesus tells him something which he knows will be hard for the man to hear – that to achieve eternal life he must “Go sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” This isn’t the answer that the young man expected – if we think back to the rich ruler’s original question when he asked “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”, notice he doesn’t ask “**how** do I inherit eternal life?” but “**what** must I do to inherit eternal life?”. He was expecting something which he could do in his own strength but to do what Jesus asked would mean putting his trust in something he couldn’t control - God. The young man came to ask Jesus his question, expecting to be given another commandment like the Jewish laws of the old testament. Jesus knew this so challenged him to think beyond the rules themselves and instead live in the spirit of the law, using the wealth he has accumulated to help the poor and once he has done that to join Jesus’ disciples. However, the man’s wealth was very important to him so he was reluctant to give it up to live in poverty even for the reward of eternal life, so Mark tells us that he went away disappointed. None of the gospels tell us what happened to the man, it is assumed that the man was unable to part with his wealth so never followed Jesus. The rich young ruler’s dependence on his wealth and fear of living in earthly poverty meant that he would instead live in spiritual poverty, his wealth preventing him from enjoying a relationship with Christ.

Now, this passage isn’t saying that having wealth is bad, but it does challenge us to think about the place wealth has in our lives and how we use it. What this passage is saying is that we are to avoid it becoming more important to us than God. The young rich man went away disappointed because his immense wealth was what he put his trust in and he didn’t believe that he could live his life in relative poverty without it. The problem is it is God whom our trust should be in and who we cannot live our lives without - rather than any earthly possessions. Jesus is telling us here that God and God alone is what we should put our trust in, no matter what the cost to us may be in earthly terms, in fact he goes on to say that the more possessions we have, the harder it is to follow Jesus as “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” Now there are many interpretations of this but I like to stick with the most obvious – a rich

man entering the kingdom of heaven is as difficult as it would be to get a large animal like a camel through the minute eye of a needle.

Again, I am making a huge generalisation here as there are many wealthy people who have used their money for good purposes, but if we look at the world today it can be seen as no coincidence that the places in which the church is experiencing a revival are often the areas with high rates of poverty as the people don't have many earthly possessions to put their trust in so find it easier to put their trust in God. Now, I must emphasise again that this is not an attempt to guilt trip anyone, there is nothing wrong with having money, we just have to work to ensure that our fear of earthly poverty does not cause us to live in spiritual poverty, preventing us having a relationship with Christ.

It is clear that the disciples don't fully understand what is happening - the word translated as amazed in verse 26 literally means to hit in the mouth, so you could say they were gobsmacked by what they saw because the perception at the time was that wealth was a blessing from God and a reward for living a good life, that God was pleased with what you have done - a misconception which some people still believe today. So they were amazed because if this man, who they saw as having received many blessings from God and who had lived a moral life couldn't attain eternal life, what chance did anyone have of achieving it.

So when Peter asks Jesus "Who then can be saved?" Jesus' response was in effect no-one can, it is humanly impossible to obtain eternal life, only God can make it possible. In verse 27 Jesus tells the disciples "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." Remember the Young man's question at the beginning of the passage "Good teacher ... what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Here Jesus is telling us that the answer to the question is nothing - as we cannot obtain eternal life on our own merits.

To understand how eternal life is open to all of us, we need look to the events of Easter. God sent his son into the world, the only man who has ever lived a blameless life and who trusted wholly and unfalteringly in God, and he was condemned to die on a cross where he took the punishment for all the ways in which we fall short. Christ had commanded the Young Rich Ruler to give up all his earthly possessions knowing that he had to give up much more - his life. But whilst the young ruler may have come up short Jesus continues to Jerusalem, knowing what is to come, because he knows that the cross is the only way we can be saved no matter what the cost to him. And because he has served the punishment for our transgressions, the gift of eternal life is available to all of us. There is nothing that we can do to earn it, all we can do is follow Jesus.

And our response to this should be to want to do as Christ commanded the Young Ruler. After the encounter with the young ruler Jesus emphasises the blessings which are open to all of us by following him. "I tell you the truth, ... no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first." Christ challenges our human instinct to pursue material possessions and earthly pleasures and focus instead on pursuing spiritual wealth - not because we have to do it to obtain eternal life, but because it is our natural response to God's grace - and if we do that and focus on following Christ then he promises that those who follow him will be blessed. But it is important to notice that amongst all the blessings that he mentioned Jesus is also careful to include mention of persecutions. Following Jesus isn't always going to be easy, in fact there are times when we will suffer for our faith, and that may involve living in poverty by Earthly standards, but these sufferings will be worth it for the amazing blessing which God provides both in this world and the next. The Psalmist in Psalm 22 starts by lamenting the difficult situation he finds himself in

<sup>6</sup> But I am a worm and not a man,  
scorned by everyone, despised by the people.  
<sup>7</sup> All who see me mock me;  
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.

But the second half of the psalm is a declaration of hope in Christ – v22  
I will declare your name to my people;  
in the assembly I will praise you.

Is our faith strong enough that when times become harder, we are able to be like the psalmist and sing praises to God? If God calls us, as he did the Young Ruler, to give all that we have to the poor and follow him, would we be prepared to do it? We all have resources that we can give – time, money, things – will we give these to help other people?

We saw at the beginning that there are people living in poverty in our parish as there are in every parish, some of it may be hidden, such as fuel poverty among pensioners. On Challenge Poverty Sunday, what can we do to help tackle this poverty both in this parish and beyond? Maybe you can support one of the existing projects the Church is involved in such as:

- providing money or items to charities to Fresh Start to support those who are homeless to get set up in a new home or
- supporting the work of Bethany, maybe by joining one of the teams who volunteer to go out and serve soup to those out on the street.
- Or maybe it is keeping an eye out for a neighbour who may be struggling and helping them.
- Or maybe it is putting pressure politically on those in power to focus on working to eradicate poverty in this country.

God calls us to put our faith into action. There must be at least 80 people here today so if every one of you goes out this week and gives something, be it money or time, to challenge poverty imagine what a difference we can make!

It is important to note that Jesus' primary call in this is a call to a life of discipleship, not to a life of poverty. So whilst I hope that you will all give something this week to help fight poverty the main challenge I'll leave you with today is this. You have a choice to make - do you accept Jesus' gift of spiritual wealth and follow him or do you focus instead on pursuing earthly wealth but spiritual poverty? Do we surrender our lives to God and follow his calling for our lives or do we go our own way like the young rich ruler? Choosing to follow Jesus may not always be easy and will mean having to give up control of our lives and possessions and trust in him, but the rewards at the end are beyond anything money can buy.