

Grace and Trust

Luke 18:18-30

18 A certain ruler asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 19 “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. 20 You know the commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honour your father and mother.’” 21 “All these I have kept since I was a boy,” he said.

22 When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” 23 When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. 24 Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! 25 Indeed, 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.”

26 Those who heard this asked, “Who then can be saved?” 27 Jesus replied, “What is impossible with men is possible with God.”

28 Peter said to him, “We have left all we had to follow you!” 29 “I tell you the truth,” Jesus said to them, “no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God 30 will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”

I am...

How many ways can you think of to complete that sentence about yourself? It could be your name, your age, gender, nationality; it would be your part in a family, or a sport that you love, the school you went, the job you did; it could be some aspect of your personality, whether you’re rich or poor, where you come from, or the hobbies you’re passionate about. It could be something to do with your faith. It could be something else completely different.

How would most Scots answer the “I am...” question today? Lots would answer it simply by saying “I am Scottish” and that would settle the question. That would be a nationality question and not necessarily a political statement! We’re told that this is how most Scots would see themselves today; “this is who I am! I am Scottish!” As we have seen, there are so many different ways by which we can answer that question, based on our job, our family, our family circumstances, as well as our faith. Sadly, not so many people in Scotland today would answer that question in terms of faith; only 1% of Scots will be in a Christian church today to worship and for most people religious faith of any kind just doesn’t come into the picture. “... the majority of Scots no longer took to Christ and His Church to show them who they are or what they should do.” (Liam Fraser) That’s what being a secular society means, that people no longer seen any need for religious faith, or for religious groups like the Church. People are still asking big questions about life, and identity, and purpose, but they don’t think that the Church has anything to offer by way of answers.

Jesus met a man who was looking for something. Maybe he wasn’t quite sure what he was looking for, but he came to Jesus with a big question. “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit

eternal life?" (verse 18) He is confident about some things: when Jesus asked him about the commandments, he said *"All these I have kept since I was a boy." (verse 21)* but he was still asking the big question. Maybe he hopes to impress Jesus with what he has done, with his willingness to do good to his fellow-human being. But he has a sense that all of this "doing good" is not enough; there must be something more to do to earn God's kingdom, to be part of the age to come when God is finally king. Does he see it as some grand gesture that he could happily and easily do with some of his money, a spectacular gift to charity, or a fund-raising dinner for the poor, something that he could organise and that would earn him God's reward in the time to come? He comes with his big question about life and hope.

He wasn't quite so keen on Jesus' answer. *"You still lack one thing. (He would agree with that! That is what brings to Jesus in the first place!) Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me." (verse 22)* We come back to the "I am..." question. This is not so much about something to do, as to what kind of person the young ruler would be. There are two parts to Jesus answer: we tend to concentrate on the first part because that's more dramatic, but actually the second part of the answer is the more significant. The first part of the answer is the grand gesture, the spectacular gift to charity, giving away all of his money to help the poor; for some people the grand gesture works and they are ready to make that gesture. The second part of Jesus' answer is all about the kind of person the ruler would become – "follow me". Is he willing to become a disciple, to follow Jesus, to be a pupil at Jesus' feet, to be humble and trusting?

Would he be willing to trust God completely with his life without his wealth? How important to him was his money? Was he willing to be humble and ready to follow Jesus? Well, we're about to find out! Luke tells us that *"he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth." (verse 23)* That could mean one of two things: it could mean that he was sad to give all his money away, but he would do it because he trusted Jesus; or it could mean that he was sad because this was the one ask that was too much for him – he loves his money too much to give it away; he loves his money far more than he trusts Jesus and so he goes away without the kingdom of God in his heart! We're not told which of these choices the ruler made, but the way in which Luke tells the story leaves us to assume that the man goes away and doesn't come back, that his lifestyle is too important to him to make changes. He misses out on the kingdom because he loves his money too much.

Reflecting on this encounter later with His disciples, Jesus said *"How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Indeed, 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." (verses 24,25)* As people in Scotland become richer, so our sense of dependence on God goes down. The richer we are, the more self-sufficient we consider ourselves to be; we don't need God anymore because we can provide everything we need from our bank balance. It is hard for rich people to be humble and trusting. Jesus paints a cartoon picture: a large animal and the smallest space – the camel tries to go through the eye of a needle! Just take the picture as it comes; imagine it! It's impossible! It won't work. That's how hard it is for a rich person to find God's kingdom.

“What is impossible with men is possible with God!” (verse 27) Jesus saves! We are who we are by the grace of God. There are two Bible answers to the “I am...” sentence. First of all, “I am a person made in God’s image” and that is true of every human being whether we recognise that or not; it is part of being human. The second answer is “I am a child of God, loved by my Father” and that is a gift of grace in Christ. We are special to God because of Jesus: as people of faith, we are part of God’s kingdom, we have a place in the age to come; we have that privilege because of the grace of God, because God has loved us despite our faults, mistakes and shortcomings. This should inspire in us a sense of complete dependence on God; it is God who saves; salvation is His gift to us because He loves the world and because Jesus has died for us. We depend on God totally for our place in His kingdom; it is not ours to earn by doing good to other people, or by some grand gesture, giving all our money to charity; our place in God’s kingdom is a gift from God.

I’ve had lots of conversations with people about these big questions; they come asking big questions about life and how to be the right kind of people or “do the right thing”. These conversations have been amicable and friendly, but more often than not these conversations have not achieved very much. People are not often willing to change the way they see life. They are comfortable the way they are; they are well-off and see no real reason to change the way they think, to humble themselves to trust God and follow Jesus. I’ve come away from these conversations sad, because I’ve met people who are looking for hope and peace and something valuable in life, but are not willing to grasp the grace of God when it is offered to them. During lockdown, people adapted to a new way of life, and now it seems that there is no room for Jesus, faith or church; people are settled in their new ways and new habits.

“I am...” someone who tries to trust God? “I am...” someone who depends totally on God and His grace? “I am...” a disciple of Jesus? Are these simple affirmations part of who we are? Can we make these affirmations? This is who we are in Christ; this is where we take our meaning and purpose in life; this is where we find our hope and our help – and all through the grace that God has for us. Salvation comes from God; it is what God does; Jesus saves! We are who we are by the grace of God. One rich ruler went away sad because he was not willing to grasp grace when it was offered to him; grasp the grace that Jesus offers today and let that grace shape who you are today and who you are forever.