Luke 18: 18-30

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

I wonder why that rich ruler in the gospel story we have just heard asked about eternal life?... He must surely have felt…unfulfilled in some way.

One of the problems of rising affluence is that ‘enough’ always means just a bit more than we have. The media makes sure that we know what is possible – or rather, what is just out of reach…

Whatever the reason, Jesus challenges him to give his money to the poor, but we discover that the price is too high for him to contemplate. Luke does not tell us that the rich man walks away sorrowfully, but surely he did. This story is also told by Mark, and as the ruler walks away, we get the phrase: **And Jesus, looking at him, loved him…** Regardless of what his decision was.

Hold that thought always.

We think of money as a medium that opens doors but here it closes the door to life: both eternal life and the life of this new community of disciples who had put Jesus ahead of their financial choices. And while this is indeed a story, make no mistake: the ruler in the story is you and me. We might well feel we have a modest lifestyle, but even an average UK salary actually puts us in the top 1% of the world’s rich list. **Thank God for where we live.**

This story challenges us about the lifestyle choices we make. And the challenge to generosity is one that we cannot duck*.* As people of faith, we have to learn to join the dots of our theology: yes, of course we all work hard and lead busy lives, so in that sense we earn our money, but it actually comes to us through God’s generosity in giving us our talents and gifts, our job opportunities, our lucky breaks. Our use of our resources must harmonise with our understanding of how very fortunate we are. **Thank God for the means to pay the bills.**

The rich ruler is the only person in the gospels to refuse a direct invitation to follow Jesus, and this story connects discipleship and wealth in a way that is both powerful and uncompromising. He comes to Jesus with, apparently, a single concern: future salvation. Crucially, anyone who seeks future salvation is challenged to live out that salvation in the present. And future salvation looks different to different people – I challenge you to consider what future salvation looks like for you personally. Is it about learning and growing as a disciple of Christ, about sharing our vision as a community, and contributing to the spreading of the Kingdom of God?

The man addresses Jesus as ‘good teacher’; and it is the adjective ‘good’ that Jesus picks up on. In doing that, Jesus is not making a big statement about himself, but quite simply pointing out that God is the only means to salvation.

Jesus says his bit about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. This is not because of any intrinsic evil in wealth – it has no intrinsic badness – but is about its gravitational pull. I love that phrase – money has a gravitational pull – it pins us, if we’re not careful, to the earth.

But there is something about generous giving, however it is manifested, that frees us from that pull. The challenge in this story is to relinquish the claim of wealth – not the wealth itself, but the claim of wealth on our lives - in order to be free to follow Jesus and to meet the needs of those around us.

Jesus reminds the man about keeping the laws, and enumerates them. And each of them touches on relationships within the community of God – the importance of behaving justly and rightly towards the people around us. And then Jesus makes of him the additional requirement: sell all you have and give to the poor. Giving to the poor helps us to re-engage with how well-off we are and to notice how much difference we can make if we choose to.

Thomas Aquinas, a thirteenth century philosopher and theologian, wrote about how a soldier had to keep both his sword and his scabbard greased at all times so that they did not rust. That meant he could draw his sword quickly when he needed to. And what Thomas was getting at was a sense of financial capability; managing money sensibly so that, when the occasion demanded, people were free to give generously. The rich ruler’s soul was so rusted up that, when the challenge to generosity was issued to him, he was completely unable to draw his metaphorical sword. Money may well open doors, but it can also close them. This man was not some sort of prodigal playboy – he had kept the laws faithfully, yet his ability to follow Jesus was totally compromised by his inability to open his heart and wallet to others.

Many of us today struggle to connect faith and money. We read the bible, say our prayers, worship and serve the church and our neighbours. But our money decisions continue to be driven by consumerism.

We release the power that money has over us by giving generously. It may start as a Biblical imperative, but it quickly becomes a joy and a way of life. Generosity sets us free. And there is a challenge in this story to make radical generosity a key aspect of our discipleship. Generous giving makes a difference not only to the lives of others but can transform our own lives too.

This gospel focus this morning sets our eyes not on how much we haven’t got, but on how much we have – and how our calling is to thank God for his generosity to us by showing generosity of our own.

**There is an American orthodox priest, Fr John Dresko, who wrote the following: My gift to God is a genuine reflection of my heart. If I give $400 per month to the bank on my car loan, but think the church is fleecing me for $20 per month, I have a heart problem. If I do my grocery shopping and write a cheque at the end of it for $200 so my family can be fed, but think $20 per month is too much for the Bread of Life, I have a heart problem. If I can go to the liquor store and hand over $20 for a bottle of liquor but complain about the cost of sharing the Blood of Christ, I have a heart problem. If I cheat the church out of regular giving by pleading ‘cash flow’ while ignoring the fact that the church has the same bills and the same ‘cash flow’, I have a heart problem.**

No one is good but God alone………… Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or anything else for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age; *and in the age to come eternal life*.

**Amen**