
To Gain Eternal Life

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 13 October 2024

Isaiah 50:4-10 • Hebrews 4:12-16 • Mark 10:17-31



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

The words of Jesus in today's Gospel are troubling. The story begins pleasantly enough. A man rushes up to Jesus and asks him how he may inherit eternal life. This is a good question, and deserves a good answer. In fact it may be the question which Jesus was rather hoping, by now, that someone would ask. For Jesus' mission on earth was to bring us the hope of salvation, and the gift to the saved is eternal life, in communion with Christ and face to face with God. So far, the disciples, none too quick at any time to catch Jesus' meaning, have been focussing on the man himself. This is understandable, since Jesus kept doing amazing things: healing the sick, driving out demons, and raising the dead. They, and the crowds who gathered around Jesus, kept asking things like, "Who is this man? How can he do these things?" and, essentially, "Does this have anything to do with the God the rabbis teach us about?"

Yet everything Jesus did on earth was to the purpose, and his purpose was to show us the grace and love of God who wants us to come to him, and be reunited with him. As you've heard me say before, Jesus' teachings all point away from himself to the one who sent him, his Father (and ours) in heaven. He tells parables, many of which have to do with understanding, like the parable of the sower. Those who hear and accept the Gospel will bear fruit, and that fruit is the life which leads to eternal life. He compares the kingdom of God to many things, in the hope that his disciples would understand. And in the Jewish tradition, he answers their questions with questions, trying to direct them to the heart of the matter, which he finally hears from the young man kneeling at his feet: What must I do to inherit eternal life?

At first, Jesus does reply with a question: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Here Jesus ties the young man to himself, both of them children of the eternal God. He then reviews a short list of the Commandments, and the man says he has kept them all since his youth. This may sound like a boast, but I read it as an honest statement; the man has truly tried to live according to the code of Moses. He does not claim to be perfect, he simply has done his best.

So have most of us tried to live by the Ten Commandments, which have become woven into our Western culture over the centuries. Not many of us murder; not many of us steal. For some, it gets a bit fuzzier when it comes to honouring father and mother, or coveting your neighbour's wife or possessions. I wonder if many people today stop to think that the things we all point to as being wrong with society today — rudeness, broken marriages, etc. — were all covered by God's commandments thousands of years ago? The code still holds true as the right way to order human relationships. God still knows best — what a surprise. And again, most of us try to live a good life, taking care of others, our family, our neighbours, and doing our best. This is what this man is saying to Jesus: I have tried to follow all these laws my whole life.

But now there is one more thing, Jesus says. If you really want to follow me, you must sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor. Then you can join us. At this, the man's face fell. It was too much to ask. He had expected something easier than this. Because he was too attached to his possessions, he could not comply with Jesus' instructions.

Of course, my next question is: can we? Can we do as Jesus asks this man to do? Could we sell all we own, give away all the money, and follow Jesus? Can we live as Jesus wants us to live — as an example to others of what we now call the Christian life?

Yesterday was a great example of that — our Parish fair. So many of you spent hours and days preparing and serving on the day. I am so thankful for you all,

in all you did — sorting items, running stalls, setting up tents, tearing *down* tents!, setting up tables, setting out the white elephant and book stalls, clearing the hall afterwards, taking payment, counting money, preparing food for others to enjoy — an amazing amount of work happened yesterday! All of us working together to achieve a great event for the community. And remember, we as Christians are known by our actions, by the way we live, by the way we treat people. Yesterday's fair was not just a good time in the sun (and thank God for the sun!), it was an opportunity to show the people who came how Christians live. We are God's servants in the world: through us others see God at work.

So, back to the young man and Jesus. We are told that after the man says he has kept all the commandments since his youth, Jesus looks at him — and loves him. That is what makes this story one of hope and not impossibility. It may be difficult for anyone, and especially the rich, to get into the kingdom of heaven. We may have to make great sacrifices. But always remember — God loves us. God wants us to be with him in heaven. Jesus tried to teach the young man about heaven and about God because Jesus loved him, and wanted him to understand. So if you see yourself in the place of that young man, wanting to know how to gain eternal life, remember that Jesus loves you.

There is one thing we can do, and it is not an action like giving alms or following the commandments like avoiding murder, adultery and theft. It is to love and to have faith. If we believe in God through Christ, we will be with Christ in heaven. Jesus called it following him — it is the same thing. To follow Christ is to love and believe in him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. Thanks be to our loving and gracious God. Amen.