

Sermon for Hinde Street Methodist Church  
Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> October 2015 11am

Job 23.1-9, 16-17  
Hebrews 4.12-16  
Mark 10.17-31

*"You lack one thing..."* The "one thing" this rich man's lacks determines his future. Yet we don't ever learn what this "one thing" was. Yes, Jesus tells him to go and sell what he owns and give the money to the poor, but he doesn't say why. He doesn't tell us what it is about the man's possessions that result in him lacking "one thing." The man is so shocked, that he leaves, grieving. And he was so shocked, because in material terms, by society's standards and the measures of the world, he lacks nothing - nothing at all. He actually has many, many strengths! He's obeyed all the commandments, he's willing and eager to follow, and he recognises Jesus' goodness. Surely Jesus could have had mercy on this one weakness, and welcomed and nurtured and coached him, into the values of God's kingdom. His money and his influence could have been so useful to the small group of Jesus' followers. But Jesus' words were *"sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from narrow..."* He leaves grieving and the disciples' are left feeling perplexed. Is his lack a lack of care or understanding for those who are poor? Is it his inability to see that eternal life, like his abundance of possessions, does not come from his doing? Or is it that, for all his obedience to God, he does not really trust God? The story is ambiguous. And the sense of bewilderment the disciples share with the rich man, is also experienced by the characters in the passage from the Book of Job, and extends to those of us who also have *"many possessions."* Just as their expectations of God are shattered, so are ours if we try to reconcile our many possessions, with a life of faithful discipleship. It's this bewilderment, the bewilderment that arises from the realisation that God's ways are the opposite of the ways of the world that I want to reflect on this morning. But just before I do, I need to say that what I will say is, not for aimed at those who do not have *"many possessions."* And I'll leave it up to you to decide which category you fall into.

One of the things I want to do on my sabbatical next year, is to reflect on the theological questions my experience of illness, raised for me. One of the books I've lined up to read is called *"Deadly Doctrine."* It's by a doctor, who after years of clinical experience, has concluded that faith, especially Christian faith, seriously undermines some people's welfare and quality of life. It's not what we usually hear. And I suspect I'm going to discover that the problem isn't faith itself, but rigid belief systems, because that's the source the bewilderment in today's readings. The understanding of God, that those who are confused and bewildered have, is that God is predictable and unchanging. And if they obey God's commandments and the doctrines of their faith community, God will reward them with security, in our chaotic and unpredictable world. What this security looks like is being blessed with an abundance of possessions and children, and a place of honour in the community that gives them the capacity to face natural disasters and resist the worst impact of illness and death. In the Hebrew Scriptures this understanding is articulated in the theology of the wisdom tradition. In it, prosperity is a sign of divine blessing, and deprivation is a sign that the blessing has been withdrawn. God rewards the righteous, and punishes the wicked, so those who suffer are experiencing God's displeasure. Despite the perception of atheists that this is what Christians still believe, most Christians reject this

theology, although it still lives on in the false theology of the Prosperity Gospel. Yet it's an idea that's so deeply rooted in our individual and communal psyche, that people still wonder whether illness, national tragedy, or other life-threatening events are God's punishment for sin.

This is the dilemma that takes up most of the book of Job. It's a nightmare of a story. One American commentator says this. *"Our national myths favour rags-to-riches, underdog-to-victor, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps storylines. But Job does not fall into any of these categories. In fact, his is a billionaire-to-beggar, top dog-to-underdog kind of story."* Job is a good person who has done everything right, but loses everything - family, friends, home, possessions, and even his health. And all this happens because of bet between God and Satan. When God points Job out to Satan, as a good, righteous and faithful servant, Satan suggests he's only good because he's lived such a sheltered life and expects God to bless him in return for his obedience. If he'd experienced suffering he'd have forsaken God a long time ago. So Satan bets God that if Job is stripped of his blessings he will reject God. God wins this bet. Job doesn't ever turn away or curse God. But the story isn't straightforward. Most of the story is a debate between Job and his friends. They resolve their bewilderment about what's happening to Job by insisting he deserves it. It's a punishment for his sins. So he needs to repent. Today's reading finds Job where we left him last week. He's still on his ash heap, and still miserable, after one of his friends has just finished giving him a lecture. Our reading is part of his response. Job is indignant. He insists he is innocent. He refuses to accept his friends' wisdom. And yet he also knows that his innocence will not give him security. So he asks questions. Who is God? Where is God? What can human beings reasonably expect from a life of faith? His monologue echos the words of Psalm 139 in which the palmist speaks of God's life-affirming presence. But Job says the opposite. God is nowhere. *"If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him."* And yet God is everywhere. *"His hand is heavy despite my groaning... I am terrified at his presence."* Job wants answers. And yet he also wants to *"vanish in darkness."*

Job's struggle with his bewilderment about what's happening to him is a struggle with God. One commentator says, *"Job is not a tame man seeking a tame God. He's a God-haunted man pursuing the passion of his life, only to crash again and again and again into mystery. His is religion at its wildest — a journey towards the Presence that is Absence, the Safety that is Terror, the Knowing that is always, in this life, an Unknowing."* The idea that religion becomes wild, when we are faced with the sorts of losses Job experienced is challenging, because most of us are afraid of chaos. It's the world that's wild and unsafe, not God or the life of faith. Surely God offers us safety and security? It's this received wisdom that Job wrestles with when his life falls apart. His friends try to reconcile their wisdom with Job's reality, but the rigidity of their theology does not allow them to risk moving beyond it, and it prevents them from ever coming close to encountering God. Job on the other hand, is accused of blasphemy because he refuses to accept the received wisdom, and yet he eventually meets God. He lets go of it and risks not knowing, rather than accept something that doesn't make sense of to his experience. He wants an honest faith. A faith that takes account of the fact that the world is messy and complicated and our lives don't always turn out as we expect. And he's prepared to keep seeking this wild, untameable God, until he is silenced in God's presence.

The idea of a wild, untameable God sounds strange. I'm familiar with it, because in the Celtic Christian tradition, the Holy Spirit is represented as a wild goose. She isn't like the peaceful, serene dove that landed on Jesus at his baptism. Wild geese are uncontrollable. They can't be restrained or bent to the human will. And unlike the calming cooing of a dove, a goose's honk is strong, challenging, strident and unnerving, and a bit scary. In much the same way, the Spirit of God can be, demanding and unsettling.

And it's my guess that that's pretty much how the rich man felt after his bruising encounter with Jesus. His theology is rooted in the same wisdom as Job's friends. And because he'd obeyed the commandments since his youth, he expected Jesus to welcome him with open arms, and tell him he was well on the way to earning eternal life. So when Jesus says, *'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'*" he's shocked to the core. He's confused, bewildered, and grieving, and so he leaves, lost to the kingdom. This is a huge challenge to my theology. You'll have often heard me say that God welcomes and loves us just as we are, and God does, because Jesus *"sympathize[s] with our weaknesses..."* So how does Jesus lose this hungry, potentially so useful, disciple? Like the church today, he only had a small band of followers, could he really afford to turn anyone away? Surely he'd have learnt kingdom values along the way and grown into them? But Jesus isn't interested in offering any of his followers simplicity or security. Living in a world where health and wealth and power are seen as a reward for goodness is challenging, because it distorts all our relationships, with every other human being, and also with God. So Jesus invites his followers to leave everything behind, and not just their possessions, families and jobs, but practices and ideas that allow us to think that we are in control of our lives when we're not, so get in the way of our discipleship.

None of this should surprise us when we look at the context of this encounter. It comes near the end of the section of Mark's Gospel in which Jesus prepares the disciples for suffering. Their journey has long turned towards Jerusalem. Jesus has spoken about his suffering, death and resurrection, three times. And the disciples have received his predictions with bewilderment, misunderstanding and fear. Yet they have continued to follow. And as they journey together do, Jesus has taught them how the values of the kingdom, challenge the received wisdom of their time and faith. *"How hard it will be for those with wealth to enter the kingdom of God."* *"Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will not enter it."* *"Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."* The rich man isn't the first who will be faced with hard questions and he isn't the last. Jesus challenged them all, disciples, religious leaders and the crowds. Each one is offered a share in transforming God's world. But it would not be a safe or predictable life. It would lead to suffering and misunderstanding, because the way of the kingdom challenges the way prestige, power and authority are exercised in the world. And only those prepared to have their lives, their values and their theology turned upside down take the risk of following. Even so, what kind of God sends a pious, searching soul away? Well surprisingly, it's someone who loves us, is willing to be scandalously honest with us and lets us walk away if we can't take the risk he invites us to take. But it must have been terrible for the rich man to realise, that the possessions he believed were symbols of his worldly accomplishments and God's blessing, were a liability. Terrible that he wouldn't automatically inherit eternal life. And terrible to

realise that he didn't want to share the values of the kingdom's inhabitants. No wonder Jesus loved him.

Just before I went to sleep last night, I heard an edition of "Forethought," on radio 4. Someone, I didn't catch his name, was describing the new life, he, his wife and their two children, had started living, since they'd realised that the thing they lacked was time. They'd realised that they, and many of their friends, just survived the working week, to get to weekends when they could really live. They had secure jobs, a home, and all the possessions they wanted, but they didn't have time. And time, he suggested, is the only resource in short supply since it can't be bought, or returned or recycled once it's gone. So they'd decided to sell their house, give up their jobs and take their children out of school for a year, to give themselves the gift of time with each other. Time they'd never get back if they didn't use it now. He wasn't advocating what they'd done it for everyone. He was just telling his story. But it seemed to me that he had grasped something of what Jesus was challenging the rich man with. Letting go of the things that give us a sense of security, but that actually get in the way of us really living, is the first step to eternal life. For Christians, really living, receiving eternal life is about much more than giving our family time, although that's an important aspect of it. For us, it's about establishing life-giving relationships not only our families and friends, but with all God's people, and with God. We possess much more than anyone would have thought possible in Jesus' time. And the richest people and countries are much, much more blest than the poorest. We have more opportunities and greater influence. Natural disasters have less impact on us than on the poorer nations and people. And the richer we are, the more likely we are, to survive illnesses, poverty and tragedy wherever we live. We may not believe that our prosperity, power and prestige are rewards from God for our faithfulness. But the way the poorest and most vulnerable in our world are treated, suggests such ideas are as deep seated as they've ever been, and even if we think we've left them behind our lives and relationships suggest otherwise.

So, the disciples ask, "*who can be saved?*" Jesus looked at them and said, *'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'*" Jesus' invitation to the rich man to let go of the thing prevented him from receiving eternal life is the pattern of his life and death and resurrection. It's the pattern of the cross that's repeated in baptism. But it's baptism, not just as a once-in-a-life-time-event, but in the multiple deaths and burials and resurrection those who follow Jesus experience every day if we're willing to open ourselves to see them. Daily deaths and burials come from the realisation that we're as much in the thrall of the old wisdom theology as Job's friends, the rich man and the disciples, and that even 'though we think we've left such ideas behind they're actually quite hard to let go. So into our struggle, comes the invitation to ponder what we might lack. We need to know what thing at the core of who we are that keeps us from being the follower, the disciple, the believer, God wants and needs us to be, because it is what prevents us from fully expressing our faith. It will be different for each of us. 'Though I suspect that for many, the one thing we lack, the thing that will allow us to begin to let go of the possessions and ideas that prevent us from receiving eternal life, is trust. The trust some call faith. For faith or trust make it possible to take the risk of facing the future, without the things we think give us security, and without knowing what the future will be. *"To journey,"* like Job, *"towards the Presence that is Absence, the Safety that is Terror, the Knowing that is always, in this life, an Unknowing."* On our own it is impossible, but as each day, we learn to trust God and God's

values and God's ways, without expectation of reward, the impossible becomes possible. And when we get it wrong, or we don't feel we've lived as well as we might, God has mercy and compassion on us, because God loves us and knows our weaknesses. *"Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."* Amen.

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