

Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse – March 29th 2009
Mark 10:17-26 Topsy-Turvy Kingdom

The young man who questions Jesus has 'it' - the x-factor, the charisma. He is respectful, sincere and earnest and is the ideal candidate to be a disciple of Jesus. Just look at what he says about himself. Note that Jesus does not challenge him about what he says, or charge him with hypocrisy, but 'loves him'.

The man asks Jesus the most important question, a religious, personal question. Just think of the prestige of getting this man on your team amongst a rag-bag of tax collectors, fishermen, and women. This man is a big fish! But Jesus messes it up. He seems to go out of his way to repel him and set an impossibly high standard. The young man goes away hurt and crestfallen. Maybe the disciples ran after him and tried to sweeten the pill for him, to make 'the camel smaller, and the needle wider'. But Jesus says what he says; he did not qualify what he said. His love did not cause him to run after him.

Not that Jesus is saying that wealth is inherently wealthy (after all Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy man who provided Jesus with a tomb on his death). It's not wealth itself that is the problem, but the attitudes it generates of self-confidence, self-reliance and pride. For a wealthy man it is well-nigh impossible to connect with the heart of the Christian message which is all grace and gift, and not dependent on ourselves, our school, our background, our body shape. It's not what we offer, but all about God's grace to us.

Just before this episode, Jesus takes a child in his arms, giving a picture of discipleship. A child is vulnerable, and in need of protection and Jesus' love. As we grow older we become sophisticated, more intelligent, and gain degrees, but we lose naïveté. We need a second childhood; after all when we protect ourselves, and become self-made men, and are self-reliant, who needs God?

Jesus is pointing out the contrast between children, to whom belongs the Kingdom of God, and the man who possesses everything. But only when he sells everything he has, does he then have everything. The disciples are shocked by Jesus' reply because they think that great wealth is a sign of God's blessing. We think that the upwardly mobile are the first in the queue.

So we have the problem that Jesus has turned everything around, and indicated that wealth is an impediment and that humanly it is impossible for a rich man to be saved. That is the point. The disciples' confusion is due to the fact that they are interpreting things at a human level. But with God, salvation is possible, but not on human terms; you have to become like a child, and then you can enter the Kingdom, of God.

This is not to make a virtue of poverty. But it does seem to create an atmosphere where we can see how needy we are. Graham Greene's novel *A Burnt Out Case*, the man identifies with the lepers in the Congo, and realises his own spiritual bankruptcy.

Philip Jenkins' book *The Next Christendom*, required reading for anyone interested in World Mission today sees a shift of Christianity to the developing world. Not that Christianity cannot thrive in capitalist societies, but it becomes harder.

So here we have the right question, to the right man. He received the right answer but he made the wrong decision, because he thought it was all about him, when it's all about God.

So are all our sacrifices for nothing? Leaving homes, families and friends and riches, these are costly things. Grace makes demands of you, but rather than thinking about forsaking things, we should look at the rewards. The real challenge is to maintain our Christianity in this consumer world.