

Sermon by Robert James

Pentecost 20 – Wesley Uniting 9.00am – 11th October 2015

Theme: “To Enter the Kingdom of God”

Readings: Job 23: 1-9, 16-17 and Mark 10:17-31

Text: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” (Mark 10:24)

Good morning all – I’m Robert James, known to some of you here for up to the last 40 years or so. In the absence of a proper preacher, or even a proper lay preacher, Rev. David has taken a risk and handed the pulpit over to me for this service. The multi-functional Tessa can perhaps, assist by identifying my doctrinal errors along the way ...

I gain a little solace from the words of John Wesley (namesake of this very congregation):

“Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God,
and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen;
such alone will shake the gates of Hell and set up the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.”

Strong words, indeed, but they do lend courage to a layman who presumes to speak from the pulpit and promote the Kingdom of Heaven on earth!

Well, “How hard, indeed, is it for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God?” What a question! What is the “Kingdom of God”, anyway? Jesus taught that the Kingdom is not a list of legalisms, or a menu of moralisms. Rather, he said, “The kingdom is within you”.

For a Muslim, we’re told that Paradise is the reward of martyrdom. That’s not quite what Jesus said, but perhaps it’s not all that different. A martyr clearly makes a decision to give up everything of this world, even his own life, in pursuit of a transcendent cause. But Jesus said “Dispose of your worldly treasures, and follow me.” So giving up your life doesn’t seem, for most of, like a particularly constructive response.

Christians, Muslims and others are being oppressed, exiled and slaughtered because of their perceived beliefs or background, and it doesn’t seem reasonable to consider that they’re all preferentially qualified to enter Paradise, Heaven, or some other version of the Kingdom of God.

It’s a bit like a wedding vow that says “I will live for you, but I will not die for you!”. It can be a miserable business awaiting just reward for a righteous life. Today we heard just a fragment of the Book of Job. It’s worth trying to read the whole dreadful story – You just about need the “patience of Job” to endure it. And, if you really want some more understanding, read Carl Jung’s analysis “Answers to Job”. Because the story certainly seems to raise more questions than it answers. There is no simple answer as to why misfortune and suffering is not confined to the guilty. At least, we no longer

believe that disability and illness must relate to the sins of our forefathers, or ascribe original sin to newborn infants. It's nice, of course, that Job's status and fortune was restored twofold after his faithfulness through a time of trial, but we know that this does not always happen!

In Matthew 6:21 we read "Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be." So this seems to be a reasonable context to consider that it may be more difficult for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle", if by "rich" we mean most strongly focussed on building material wealth.

A wealthy person may well say "Some people have a talent and delight in singing in the choir, some for mowing church lawns, some in running the Op Shop, and some even in preaching sermons! I'm not much good at these things, but the Lord in His wisdom has endowed me with the gift of earning money" (that person may say), "and God's work in our community certainly needs that, so and I can contribute in that way".

So just as our body needs its hands, its feet and its eyes, the work of our church needs many type of contributions, and sharing of wealth is one of them!

We've never owned a car worth more than \$10,000. I don't think that this is particularly virtuous, and I don't question the priorities of those who do. But I also don't dream or pray or sing, like Janice Joplin "Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz ... " – I don't think that owning a Merc. or a low-emissions, diesel-powered VW would bring me any closer or any farther away from the Kingdom of God.

A little closer to home, perhaps, is the Fiddler on the Roof, who prays "Would it spoil some vast eternal plan, if I were a wealthy man ... ?" Now I have no desire for the "staircase leading nowhere, just for show" or the other ostentatious trappings of wealth that he craves, but I do confess to the occasional whimsical fancy: "Wouldn't it be great if I were just a little better-off than I am ... ?"

Here's a little test for you (to consider privately) – Who can say that they have never had a desire for better health, better personal or family relationships, better parents, more compliant children, nicer friends or a more healthy bank balance – all these components of what we might call a rich life? And who would say that these desires, and possibly accomplishments, should preclude them from the Kingdom of God?

Well, " ... harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" – I wonder, does that apply to a rich congregation, a rich parish, or a rich church ... ? At our Joint Church Council meetings, we struggle with the dilemma of "Bricks and mortar versus good works".

- What is our stewardship responsibility for this property, as opposed to our community responsibility for social justice and social welfare?
- Should we repaint the Vercoe Room or renew the roof on Lancaster Hall, or should all available financial resources go to supporting widows and orphans, aged care, employment services, education and supplementing Centrelink?

Our Methodist and Presbyterian heritage is generally averse to displays of wealth – traditionally austere and functional.

The Uniting Church has a mixed score card with respect to fiscal prudence in all these areas. Are they our key business? The church's wealth, such as it is, comes not only from the generosity and voluntary efforts of its members, but also from the growth of property assets.

So should the Vatican sell off its riches to give to the poor, or are these precious art works etc. Indeed well used to build and support the Kingdom of God on earth?

Mahatma Gandhi's list of "Seven Deadly Sins" includes "Wealth without work", and most of us, I think, would agree that a widespread expectation of unearned wealth is not a great foundation for sustainable prosperity, and not greatly in accord with the spirit of the Ten Commandments that Jesus quotes in answer to the rich man's question. I would say that the "protestant work ethic" of responsibly building, investing and sharing material wealth is strongly consistent with the spirit of these Commandments, and one of the ways to contribute to the Kingdom of God on earth.

It's hard to know what it would mean in real terms, for the church or for us as individuals, to "sell everything, give to poor, and follow Jesus". Jesus said that "The poor will always be with us", and I think that for all of us to become financially poor would not necessarily be in the interest of the common good or the Kingdom of God on earth.

Again from John Wesley:

"Do you not know that God entrusted you with your money (all above what buys necessities for your families) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and, indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind? How can you, how dare you, defraud the Lord, by applying it to any other purpose?"

Strong words, again! Perhaps this statement should be displayed at all retail outlets and on-line sites of cakes and lollies, soft drinks, alcohol, cigarettes, cosmetics, entertainments, and the vast panoply of luxuries that fill our lives.

The Taliban's imposition of this type of austerity in their time in Afghanistan was not particularly successful, and I note with interest that Jesus was not averse to the consumption of fine wine at weddings or expensive oils for the anointing of feet. Hmm – so I suppose that we'll just have to find our own way in the management of our resources.

Some of these issues have arisen recently in our experience of some rites of passage:

- Today is Jeanne's 65th birthday. One of her requirements to adapt when teaching at our Muslim School was that some of the children were not to celebrate birthdays. We wondered how that would relate to their qualification for admission to the Kingdom of God.
- Following a cup of tea this morning, we'll rush to St Paul's at Burra for the baptism of Isla Chapman, who had a pretty difficult entry into the world, and for whom

we've been praying at our Thursday Intercessory service. My grandmother would have said that if she didn't make it to the point of baptism, she would not make it to Heaven! I wonder, is that fair? Is it Biblical?

- And at the other end of the life-cycle, on Friday we attended the funeral at Bredbo, of a 94-year-old lady with 32 grand-children and 20 great-grand-children. We had the reading from John Chapter 14 which is often used at funerals:

In my Father's house, there are many rooms ...

I am going there to prepare a place for you.

I will come back and take you with me, that you also may be where I am.

You know the way to the place that I am going ..

I am the way and the truth and the life.

No one comes to the father except through me.

Perhaps we should consider **this** a sufficient template for action, if we crave admission to the Kingdom of God.

Amen.

~0~