

Eternal life ?

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O God, forasmuch as without you
we are not able to please you
mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit
may in all things direct and rule our hearts.

Our text may be found in today's gospel and is Mark chapter 10 and verse 17:

'Good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life ?'

The account of the rich young man who asks Jesus the question which is our text today – **'Good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life ?'** – should be a warning to us all to be careful what questions we ask because we might not like the answers we receive.

The question is a good one. The lad wants to know what is the necessary precondition in order to receive the gift of the life of the world to come. In Christian terms, his question is about salvation: the boy is focussing on what he needs to do, what is required of him ? Eternal life, life after death, is a developing concept in Jewish belief. The Sadducees, being more conservative, did not believe in the survival of the individual soul after death; the Pharisees, believe it or not, being more progressive in their thinking, did. Clearly, this young man instinctively felt like the Pharisees: that it was important to behave properly in order to receive the gift of eternal life.

The Greek word that Mark uses for 'inherit' is interesting. It's κληρονομεω (kleronomeo) which literally means 'to obtain by lot'. Not quite inheritance in our sense of the word, but like inheritance, to receive something by lot refers to something that someone else has given us. It is ours but it is ours by gift from the one who has it to give. So I guess his question is essentially 'what is needful if I am to receive as a gift the life of the world to come ?'

Okay so let's look at three things: the circumstances; what is said; and the consequences.

We're into the second half of Mark's gospel. Jesus and his disciples have now turned towards to Jerusalem and what awaits him there. His disciples are convinced that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus has been transfigured on Mount Horeb in the presence of Peter, James and John. They all know the personal cost of being disciples: to deny themselves, to take up their cross and to follow him. And now this rich young man rushes up to Jesus and kneels before him and pops the question, 'Good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life ?'

You can't question the lad's enthusiasm and respect. He rushes up to Jesus and kneels down before him and he is very polite, calling Jesus 'good'. But Jesus sharply corrects him: 'Why do you call me good ? No one is good but God alone.' Ouch ! Off to a bad start. But of course in a way the boy is right: Jesus is 'good' too because he is the Son of God and like God the Father, God the Son is necessarily 'good'.

Then Jesus reminds him of the ethical centre of Judaism – the Ten Commandments or if you prefer all 613 of them. Here Jesus cites some of the things not to do: murder; adultery; stealing; lying; cheating. And one positive: respecting parents. And the young man replies that indeed he has observed these precepts from childhood. And Jesus looks at him and he loves him because he sees the lad's enthusiasm and his potential.

So Jesus gives him a final challenge, invites him to take the last step to perfection and tells him to 'go sell what you own and give the money to the poor; and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.' Oops not what he wanted to hear because the lad is very well off so he goes away deeply unhappy.

And finally the consequences. Well we know the young man is upset because his possessions mean more to him than the prospect of eternal life. In a way, the boy has bought into a world view that if God blesses you, then part of that blessing is going to be material wealth. But there is another tradition, that of holy poverty one famous advocate of which was St Francis who embraced the rule of poverty as a way to be spiritually rich. And a reasonable question might, therefore, be is God calling me to a life of poverty? And that, my friend, is a question that only you can ask and know for yourself. Wise stewardship of what we have is the general principle but whether we are being called to use our wealth wisely or to give it away completely only we as individuals can know.

So today we see someone keen to follow Jesus and we see the possible individual cost of so doing. Eternal life may be something we obtain by lot or inheritance

and it is in God's gift but there is a strong sense too that we need to do something, not necessarily to earn eternal life but to show that we have responded to the love of God by what we do. The boy did but he was not happy about the real price he had to pay. Are we ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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H: Sermon 26 : Eternal Life

