

Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland

Rt Rev Colin Sinclair

Wednesday 22nd May 2019

Barriers to following – Mark 10:17-31

A young man kneels before Jesus without embarrassment. He wants something that despite all his privileges he does not have.

1. He wanted life with a capital “L”

He didn't want to drift through life aimlessly. He needed focus and direction. With only one life to live he didn't want to end up with regrets, spending his time surfing the net, playing video games or seeing if his posts were liked on social media. He didn't want to live his life vicariously on Snapchat or Instagram. He had one life and wanted it to count. He wanted to be a player not a spectator, to shape life not simply be shaped by it.

2. But he hadn't got it

That was an honest and courageous confession. Too often we pretend. We put up a mask and play the part, knowing there is a world of difference between outside appearances and the inner reality. He seemed to have it all. All the boxes were ticked- young, wealthy, healthy, rich and powerful -what is not to like? And he comes across as open, humble, earnest, respectful, determined focussed and yet... something was missing. Having it all is sometimes not enough. It was if he had been climbing a ladder which, when he got to the top, was found to be leaning against the wrong wall. He was not willing to live a lie. He was empty inside, bored if he was honest. He was a go-getter for whom life in all its fullness had eluded him.

3. So if you haven't got it perhaps somebody has to give it to you

“Good Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Was his wealth inherited? Could someone equally give him life? He knew he couldn't switch it on, work it up or tune into it. Tell what to do and I will do it if it lies within my strength.

4. Most wonderfully of all he believed the answer lay with Jesus

He saw what he sought in Jesus. He heard what he was looking for in his teaching about the kingdom of God –which valued everyone, cared for all, left no-one out. He saw in Jesus someone in whom the reality matched the words.

There is a myth that God, if he exists, is a spoilsport; that heaven is boring and that goodness is tame and dull. On the other hand hell is a party, evil is exciting and fun- and the preferred choice of the smart people. The reality is quite the reverse. There is nothing duller, drabber and more repetitive than evil, which sucks joy, love and life out of a person. There is nothing more varied, creative and winsome than genuine goodness.

GK Chesterton once said “If a person hasn’t discovered something they would die for they aren’t fit to live.” “Life in all its fullness,” I suggest, needs two things:

- a) Something to live for - a sense of purpose
- b) Someone to love who loves you in return -a sense of belonging

Both of these are found in Jesus.

“Good Master” he began but Jesus picks him up immediately on that. “Why do you call me good? No-one is good but God alone.” He was not saying “I’m not good.” He was asking “Do you think I’m God?” In other words- who do you think you are talking to?

If Jesus is simply a historical figure, bound to the past, then doff your cap in respect then move on. If Jesus is the genie in the lamp then you are in charge and you can call on his help in a crisis. If, however, Jesus is God in human form then everything stands on its head. He is in charge not you. Yet paradoxically he is able to give what you desire- be it life, direction or destiny.

Jesus then reverses the question “And how good do you think you are?” and cites examples of our responsibility to others. His record is impressive and his character enviable. He may be innocent, naïve, even superficial but he was genuine and honest in his reply, “All these I kept since I was a boy.” Mark says that “Jesus loved him” This is the only person in the Gospels of whom this is said. However because Jesus loves him he tells him the truth, gently but clearly. Jesus was tender and tough, full of grace and truth.

“One thing you lack” but it was not a luxury item but a necessity. What was missing? It was Jesus himself. Until he is central the person’s quest would continue.

Getting in the way for this person was possessions. For you or me, it may be something different but there is always something- a lifestyle choice, an attitude, an ambition. The old wedding rubric said “Forsaking all others I cleave only unto thee.” But when you do make that choice and stand by your commitment, you can find the fulfilment of love in marriage.

Kierkegaard once wrote: “To be an admirer of Jesus is much easier than to become a follower” But Jesus wants followers not fans.

You cannot have Christ and everything else. This person didn't have possessions, possessions had him. His wealth gave him his security, identity and standing. It must be hard to live for the kingdom of God if you have the kingdom already. Money had too much control over his life. Money can keep you from the things in life that money can't buy such as love, friendship, joy, peace and kindness. Money is a wonderful servant but a terrible master- so he was told to get rid of it.

Christianity is Christ. “Come follow me” That was the problem. He saw Jesus as the signpost to life not the road itself. The call of Jesus was to follow- it always is. But his time was tied up, he was needed, valued, invited out. He ran his own diary and called the shots. To change that would not be easy.

No-one submits to the call of Jesus unless they believe he is the Christ. Having run to Jesus he turns and shuffles away, an internal storm ravaging his soul. And Jesus, because he loved him, let him go! “You can't paddle a canoe with one foot on the bank!”

Suppose however that this is a word not just to us personally but to our Church today. Someone asked an African Christian why the church was growing in Sub Saharan Africa when it was declining in Western Europe. His reply was “In the West you have God and things; In Africa we only have God.”

Could it be that the very things we count as a blessing- resources, money, even the vestiges of power and influence could get in the way of our depending on God, and hold us back from the obedience of faith?

Would we prefer to turn our back on Jesus than lose all that, and, if we do, how great will be our loss? Did he come back? I do not know but I hope so. We, however, must make our response- personally, at a congregational level and as a Church.

Peter said “Well we have left everything to follow you” And they had. Jesus replied “And hasn't been worth it! You didn't lose by it, Peter! What an adventure we have been on. You have been repaid 100 fold in relationships and purpose. You are becoming part of a great family of faith that crosses all barriers. It is not easy but always worth it. Now take care, you can lose what you have been given. The first can become last and the last first. Stay close, press on. Follow me!