Sermon 10.10.21 T19 Pr23 CC

How fitting that our Gospel for today begins with a question in which Jesus is addressed as ‘Good Teacher’, for we have with us a very good teacher, Mariella Ardern, Principal of Chelsea Academy, to whom you can put any questions you may wish after service this morning, though I imagine, she would rather that they have some connection with Chelsea Academy, rather than an alternative exposition on today’s scripture readings , although I do believe the message of these readings applies equally to churches and church schools.

‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’ Asks the young man. Well, choosing to attend a church school may not guarantee eternal life, but, if what I know of Christ Church School and Chelsea Academy, are anything to go by, then certainly attending a church school will open your eyes and ears to the wonders of creation, inspire you with values of compassion, care and an openness to the needs of others, it will school your children and you in an ethos of Christian commitment, challenge and discipline. Which is a pretty good place to start on the journey to eternal life.

Fascinatingly the young man who comes to ask Jesus a question, arrives ‘As Jesus was setting out on a journey’. Mark is emphasising that this Jesus is not a static figure, a fount of all knowledge, immovable, enlightened, but that he is one like us, who we dare to call God’s son, setting out on a journey, with all the unknownness, capacity for choice and random engagement which might accompany it. For eternal life, which the rich young man, seeks to inherit, is, in Marks’ Gospel, never about what happens after death, but rather about a quality of life here and now. In Mark’s Gospel, time and time again, it is this intersection of our chronological journey and the timelessness of God’s constancy, which opens eternity, which is not to be equated with ‘for ever’, but is much more about the depth of our living at any point.

And there is a hint of this in the reading from the letter to the Hebrews too, as the writer describes God as ‘living and active’, not a set of laws to be obeyed, not a contract to be signed, but a living active presence, like a two edged sword, piercing right to the heart of all things. As does this young man’s question.

Is it education, is it business acumen or success, is it body shape or romantic conquest which is the stepping off point to eternal life? Clearly none of these things does Jesus have in mind, but, because he was a rich young man:

‘Go sell all you possess and give the money to the poor, then come follow me’.

More politically radical Christians have often emphasised the first part of this commandment and overlooked the second, and more conservative evangelical Christians emphasised the second at the cost of the first. But Jesus’ command is to do both. And, not having much to sell is no excuse either. What Jesus is saying is whatever you cling to, be prepared to divest yourself of it- give it away, share it, use it for those who go without- be that your bank balance, your property, your career, your education and do so now, today, so that you may come, follow him.

Perhaps this is the great shock of the command. Today- now, get on with it, and come follow me.

I’m quite sure the rich young man would have had no fears about using the possessions, of which he had so many, to benefit others in his will, his inheritance (or whatever the 1stC Palestinian equivalent to the probate courts would have been), but that’s not the point. This is Jesus saying, share, free yourself from all that is hindering you to follow me NOW, today.

It’s fascinating to see Jesus of Nazareth, the sharp two-edged sword, discerning exactly where the bubble of the rich young man needs to be pricked. Jesus challenges him to go and do, right now, the one thing this rich young man seems unable to countenance. And this was clearly a good man, he’d heard and engaged with Jesus, he realised there was something significant about him, which is why he approached Jesus in the first place. So incisive is this response of Jesus to this good man, that the disciples also go away perplexed about their own position, ‘Children how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God’. But the radical word has clearly entered through the totally unseen chink in the armour of the young man and he goes away, he goes away by himself- we know not where and we know not the outcome. He goes away to accept or reject that very ‘Today’, that now, to take a stand, make a decision.

It's not hard to translate this challenge into our own lives. Our todays of having to decide – what do we cling to, where do we hide, where do we take refuge? Our jobs, our relationships, our bank balance, our achievements- and how have we reacted when that two-edged sword has found its way into our consciences. Have we decided today is the day- or tomorrow, or next week, or when I graduate, or when the children have left home, or when I retire?

Yet, throughout this challenge of relinquishing, by Jesus, there also runs a thread of inheriting. There is no one, argues Jesus, who has relinquished the apparent security of this world’s goods now, today, who doesn’t inherit, the depth of eternal life in this life. And where there is such relinquishing and receiving is the very place where the living entity of Christ’s body, the church, is to be experienced today. It may overlap with the Church, with our church schools, with individual Christians, and I pray it does, but it is by no means limited to such.

‘Seek the Lord and live’- shouts the prophet Amos- and Jesus echoes, today, right now.

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