

# Sunday 11 October: Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

## The Call to Trust

**Readings: Hebrews 4.12-end; Mark 10.17-31**

There are times in our lives when the Gospel seems to demand far more than we are realistically able to give. Jesus' call seems impossible to fulfil. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" the rich young man asks. Jesus says "Go, sell all you have, give your money to the poor and you will have treasures in heaven and then come and follow me." Perhaps there have been times in all our lives of passionate idealism when we have felt "wouldn't it be good if...": if we really could live like Christ commands, moments when, aware of our own selfishness and materialism, confronted by lifestyles we no longer believe in and responsibilities and anxieties we would love to be free of – we have glimpsed a Christ-like freedom beyond those things. Have you not ever, facing the poverty and need of others, longed for such radical generosity... to save the starving child, the earthquake victims, to help the injured victims of a bomb in an overcrowded hospital, or transform the life of a homeless person in the street – that is, before common sense kicked in. "Of course you can't give away everything you have," reason tells us, "because if you did you would be no better off than the poor you wish to help. You'd be part of the problem. You've got to buy the cloak in order to give half away." But have you not ever longed to go beyond what is sensible and trust this call is not simply a piece of romantic idealism but actually true – to cross the line as it were, trusting God and letting go of self-interest and taking the risk of following the one who seems to be demanding our whole lives offered for others?

I remember the passage we have just read clearly. Twenty years ago I was trying to discern whether I should go on teaching at a college where I was very happy, or begin studying at theological College. In fact I had made my decision to continue teaching and I wrote to a priest who was like a mentor or spiritual director at that time to say I had decided to put off my application for another two years. Like St. Augustine I think I wanted the religious life but not yet. My spiritual director wrote back more directly than he had ever done before and said that I should read the story of the rich man in Mark. The compassion of Christ is infinite but there are times too when the demands of Christ are great. To this rich young man they are four-fold: go, sell, give, come. It is direct and total. Christ at this moment is demanding not less than everything. My mentor suggested gently there are times in our lives where we simply cannot put off decision, go with the flow, carry on doing what we are doing and make the decision later. There are times when quite simply Christ seems to be calling us out of our comfort zone and to embark upon a decision or change unsure of where it will lead us. Some choices do not come a second time. His letter prompted me to make a decision to begin the path of study which eventually led to my ordination five years later. Had I seen all of that path at the time I think I would have had even greater doubts and even greater hesitation. But I have never doubted that it was the right decision.

I like the line that Jesus looks at the man, loved him and then makes his demand. I think this shows that the love is not dependent on our response. In other words we are loved whether we say yes or we say no. The love of Christ is not at issue, but what is at issue is fullness of life – life without limit or end. Christ is longing for this rich person to choose fullness of life. In our own lives when we help others to discern the way forward especially young people we glimpse this. We are sometimes able to see the choice which will bring hope and blessing and life and yet we cannot force someone, even someone we love to make a choice, because the choice must be their own. I think all of us will recognise in our lives and in the lives of those

we love that there have been choices made which were life denying and there were also others which we feared and yet have led to life.

Now this choice for the rich man does not come out of the blue. It's as though he has been preparing for it. He tells Jesus with some pride that he has kept the commandments – he's been following the rules. He has not murdered or committed adultery, he has not borne false witness, he has not defrauded, he has honoured his father and mother. Sometimes, in the light of the rich man's failure to respond to the demand to go sell, give to the poor, and follow, we see the keeping of these commandments as inconsequential. Far from it: these commandments are, if you like, the discipline and preparation for the call that is to come. In our Autumn Education Programme on inspiring art we heard how important it was for any artist to learn the technique and discipline, the foundation of drawing before they could experience the full scope and spontaneity of the creative process. In the same way there is a discipline at the foundation of our faith which can lead us into the freedom of God's call.

And yet when this call comes, the rich man, like many of us, is shocked and turns away grieving, because Mark tells us he was a very rich man. The word 'grieving' suggests we are holding onto something which is dead – loving in the past tense. Perhaps we are scared of the future, perhaps we feel it's not worth it, perhaps there are things we treasure too much and the sacrifice seems too great. Perhaps we fear that this faith of ours is a delusion, the kind of dementia which leads us to act rashly or foolishly. One of my dearest priest friends always said to me "You have to work out which ditch you are prepared to die in." But there are times when the ditch is worth dying for – where you realise that actually there is no other way but to trust God and that to turn away from God would be to diminish the life of others and your life too.

I was acutely aware of this when visiting someone in hospital this week who had been extremely anxious about the operation they were about to have. The anxiety was not misplaced. There was a very real danger in the operation and a risk that it would not be successful. The patient had done their homework, weighed up the prognosis, discerned the necessity for the operation, followed the rules of preparation, taken the correct medication, seen the right specialist; now after all of that, what she found the most difficult part of all, was entrusting her life into the hands of the surgeon. But you see she couldn't do the operation herself. I said to her "Look, it's a bit like getting on an aeroplane, you have to do your bit, pack your bags according to the rules, get your ticket and go through check in, immigration and security but actually once you're on the plane you have to trust the pilot and the aircraft. It would be a great mistake to try and drive or navigate the jumbo jet yourself. And she did trust and that trust was life-giving, like climbing over the fence into a field which had so much more light and space to live.

Trust does not negate responsibility but it does demand a certain humility. I think humility is often not seen as a very important virtue these days. Perhaps we think of the oily false humility of a Uriah Heap on the make, "Humble I am and humble I'll stay, Mr. Copperfield." We have been taught to be all in all 'self-sufficient' as a virtue – not 'God-sufficient'. But real humility is of Christ. It is a humility which looks the real situation in the face, which weighs up consequences and which, with eyes open still, chooses to trust in the ways of God even at risk to self. Real humility makes space for God in the realisation that that there is a truth worth trusting beyond our human understanding. Love itself demands such trust. Without such trust where would we be? We would be continually acting in self-preservation, always denying the possibility of reaching out to others beyond self-interest. We would be a Church only concerned with ourselves rather than a Church seeking the generous kingdom we have glimpsed in Christ.

When I first came to St. Martin's, on a clergy away day I was told the famous words of John Wesley, "Pray as if everything depends on God, and work as if everything depends on you." I felt rather daunted by this. Wesley himself, I have learnt, was a workaholic who in old age claimed that his eyesight was causing him great problems, because now he was *only* able to study for sixteen hours a day. I can see what Wesley meant about prayer and work of course, but I think sometimes we have got it round the wrong way. There are times in our lives when we have to pray as if everything depends on us, and work knowing that everything ultimately depends on God.

Go, sell, give, come, follow. Can the most radical call of God become possible and life giving? "Faith", said St. Augustine, "is to believe what we do not see and the reward of faith is to see what we believe."