

Trinity 20

I stand here in need of God's mercy and grace. May I speak in the name of the God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

There is such earnestness in the question this man asks. He runs up and kneels before Jesus, clearly desperate to receive a definite answer, one that will give him assurance and certainty. Certainty that he will have eternal life, that death will not be the end. A recipe that if followed to the letter will guarantee a good outcome.

At first Jesus tells him, what all the religious teachers in his life would likely have told him before. Follow the ten commandments. Simple as that.

The man tells Jesus that this is exactly what he's done all his life. He followed all the rules. But something seems to keep nibbling at him, he senses that something is missing.

And Jesus looks at him with love. Jesus looks at him, sees him, and loves him just the way he is. And Jesus sees what is missing.

"Sell what you have and give it to the poor and come and follow me."

Jesus gets to the heart of things here. Because the truth is, as the man rightly sensed, God doesn't care about us following the rules to the letter. God cares about our hearts. In another place Jesus tells us that if we love God with all our heart and with all our strength and we love our neighbours as ourselves, we will surely fulfil all God's commandments.

Because this is what God truly cares about, our love. Our love for God and for our neighbours.

The man asking Jesus here for certainty about eternal life, clearly takes God seriously and cares deeply about getting it right. But Jesus also sees that there is one thing he loves more than God or his neighbour: His wealth, his possessions. And so Jesus invites him to abandon his wealth and instead to wholeheartedly love God and his neighbours, by giving away his wealth to the poor and following Jesus.

I think that's the moment the man realises what the thing was he felt was missing. But it's too much, it would mean risking it all, for an uncertain future with no more safety net and all the comfort of being well off gone. And so he walks away, loved and understood by Jesus, but not ready for that to be enough.

We don't know how the story of this man continued. I wonder sometimes. Maybe it was too much in that moment, but he clearly had a deep longing inside him. I suspect this encounter did not leave him unchanged, although change might have come more gradually or at a later time. Only God knows.

This encounter between Jesus and the wealthy man is powerful. It is also a little uncomfortable, because it might lead us to ask questions of ourselves. What do we hold dear? What is important to us? What might we love more than God and our neighbours?

Where do we follow the rules, more because they feel safe, than because we wholeheartedly love God and our neighbours? The law is important, it gives us guidance on how to love God and neighbour, but what really matters to God is not our following of rules, but our hearts. Where is our heart at? What or who is it we truly love? What does Jesus see when he looks lovingly at you and me? How would Jesus invite each of us to love God and our neighbours wholeheartedly?

Amen.