

THE RICH AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

MARK 10: 17-31

Justice & Righteousness Series

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, in the example of your son, Jesus, you call us to be solidarity with all your people, especially those who are poor and are on the margins. Help us to remain vigilant of our class prejudices lest we conform to the snobbery that undermines our witness. Amen.

EXEGESIS

In this gospel passage, Jesus challenges the rich young man to give up his material possessions in order to be in solidarity with those who are poor. It is often believed that this passage was included in the Biblical canon as a challenge to rich believers who were part of the 'Jesus Movement' from its earliest inception. Jesus' challenge to the rich man has been read by radical Christians as a challenge to the comfortable forms of Christian discipleship that have emerged in the West since the outbreak of the industrial revolution and the rise of the urban middle class.

Jesus' seemingly harsh questions are a bitter pill to swallow for the rich man, even though, prior to this moment, his responses seem almost exemplary. Unsurprisingly, given the religious context in which many Christians have been nurtured in the West, the majority of us have been taught to read this text 'spiritually', interpreting it to mean that nothing should come between us and God.

Given the traditions of Christianity that encourage Biblical literalism, it is surprising that I have yet to come across a church that has chosen to read this text in a literal way! What would happen if we read this text not as an allegory to 'put God first' (while still maintaining our economic base that allows us to spiritualise this very challenge), but as a real issue of putting aside our class privilege in order to identify with the poor? This seems like a strange, perhaps, even a crazy notion.

Yet this challenge has been put forward Liberation theologians, such Gustavo Gutierrez and the Boff brothers, and has largely been ignored. Liberation theology has challenged the whole church to see the gospel as best understood in terms of being a political and spiritual movement that will enable the poor and oppressed to live real lives as full human subjects in this world. In this respect, their work, and that of many others, has reminded the church that solidarity with those who are poor is not an added optional extra, but at the heart of Jesus' ministry.

The question that confronts all middle-class Christians, myself included, is how are we to live out the practical challenges of this text? Or is it, like so much of our practice, a form of vacuous rhetoric, which we have limited, even no commitment to live out?

REFLECTION

I was born in and spent the first 19 years of my life in the West Yorkshire city of Bradford. I was born into a working-class family whose life was dominated by the latter end of the era of industrial and manufacturing Britain. My father worked in a large engineering company who at one point employed over 10,000 people in the city.

The Christianity into which I was nurtured was one that was proud of its successes and social advancement. This was a Christianity of the petty bourgeoisie – small business men, rightly proud of their hard work and thrift – the outward manifestation of a life of studious hard work and holiness. I was a product of that world, and my own social advancement was in many respects a manifestation of the characteristics of hard work, holiness and ‘always doing your best’.

If my descriptions of this socio-cultural world seem to have an element of critique about them, then I should be clear and state that my challenge is as much to myself as it is to the wider context that shaped and formed me. This passage is a challenge for all of us to reflect on.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the implications for church life if it really is harder for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God?
2. Many people assert that verses 29-30 are ‘proof texts’ which show that fully-committed Christians should be wealthy and have lots of material possessions – what do you think?
3. How does this text challenge you in your own Christian discipleship?

CLOSING PRAYER

God of justice and love, help us to be in solidarity with those less fortunate than ourselves. May our Christian witness, in church and in the wider society, be one that shows the alternative values of your upside-down Kingdom, where there is a radical reversal of rich and poor, powerful and weak. Amen.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1973).
- Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1987).

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