

## 10 Camels and Needles

One day a rich man came to Jesus. He was one of the “rulers”, that is, I suppose, he belonged to one of the landowning families who automatically held authority in their communities. He wanted to know how he could have eternal life.

I’m reminded of a very rich man who appeared on a television program recently. The program was all about a recently-discovered gene which seems to decide how long people live, and this rich man is confident that by buying into the research he will be one of its first beneficiaries, assured, barring accidents, of indefinite youthful life.

The man who came to Jesus was not expecting to buy eternal life, for, tho rich, he was a good man and sensible. He hoped that the rabbi would tell him what he must do to gain eternal life; and Jesus told him: “You must obey the commandments”. It was a straitforward and conventional answer. “Obey the laws of God and you will live.” The man would not have been surprised at it. But he was a genuine person whose search for life had already given him some insite. He knew there had to be more than this simple answer. Enumerating the ten commandments of God’s law, he could honestly say “I have kept these all my life,” but his soul was searching for more.

Taking a good look at him, Jesus saw someone he appreciated. He saw someone who was neither boasting nor deceiving himself: a man who mite in fact be redy to step forward and take hold of life in the Kingdom of God. So he said to him, “There is only one more thing you have to do. Go and sell your possessions. Give everything away to the poor and follow me”.

But that was too much for the rich man, who went away saddened. He had got his answer and he could not take it. To give up his possessions was more than he could manage and at the very gate of the Kingdom he turned away. Jesus watched him go and could only reflect: “How difficult it is to for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heven. It’s easier for a camel to get thru the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into the kingdom of heven.”

His disciples found this a bit stiff, and so have Christians and the Church ever since. Within a very few generations, as Christians spred through the cities of the Eastern Mediterranean, Clement, a theologian of Alexandria, was explaining it all away. The possessions that the rich man had to give away were, he said, his passions. (Clement seems to ignore the fact that the gospel tells us the rich man was already living according to God’s commandments.) According to Clement, the man was to become a noble stoic, detaching himself from passions, which sway the mind and weaken the will. (Clement does not explain how these passions are to be given to the poor, or what good it will do to the poor if they are!)

The Church has tied itself in knots ever since, dodging the teaching of Jesus so as not to offend the rich. It’s not surprising we can’t give an account of the Messiah that makes any sense in our times. We have removed one of the planks of his rule, admitting with some sort of confused apology that it would be impractical to take his

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teaching at face value when it runs so counter to the normal functions of the world we all live in.

Of course, we insist that because he is the Son of God his teaching will have a deep spiritual meaning. And of course he is the Savior, and therefore, if we listen to him, that teaching will reach into our souls and there touch us with guidance for our salvation – but it's not as if he were the Messiah, whose teaching would be law for the ordering of this world!

Let me first clear up some possible misconceptions. In this encounter with the rich man, Jesus is not teaching that “property is theft”. There is no suggestion that it is wrong to own property, for the rich man faithfully obeys all the commandments of God. Nor does Jesus give that same instruction to all his followers. One of his friends owned a room in Jerusalem itself large enough to accommodate at least thirteen for the Paschal Supper<sup>1</sup>. When the tax collector Zaccheus<sup>2</sup> repented and made fourfold restitution to the people he had cheated, Jesus welcomed him as a Son of Abraham and there was nothing said about giving away the rest of his property.

When Jesus told the rich man: “Sell your property and give everything away to the poor”, he was not enunciating a new law, or even giving a rule for all those who wished to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. He was telling one man what he saw he needed to do, to receive the life he was looking for. We are not dealing with a law here, but an invitation, and a sad reflection on its refusal.

I think that if any of us goes to the master with the question: “How can I receive eternal life?” we too will get the simple answer: “Obey the Law”. That is the answer that will point us in the right direction. But if our soul has already gone that way, or tried to go that way, and is sure there must be something more, we too will receive another, more challenging answer. What it will be, I do not know, because it will be, for each one of us, the thing that is wanting in me. It will touch on something that holds me back, something I don't want to change. That is how Jesus reached out to the rich man.

But in reflecting on the man's refusal, Jesus tells us very clearly that the rich as a group are stuck among those who are not able to make the change they need. Jesus does not reject the rich. He doesn't forbid them the kingdom of heaven. In fact, he offers it to them as he did to that rich man. But he has learnt that they cannot take up the offer – for them it is too hard. And so it remains. To be rich is to be unable to take that step. The very decisions and commitments that keep us rich, that keep our substantial property ours, are the ones that don't fit into the kingdom of heaven. When we come to the gate, it's wide open, inviting us, but we can no more get thru than a camel can get thru the eye of a needle however clear of obstructions it is.

There is nothing in the gospel story to make us hate the rich or to suggest that they are bad people. There is no reason for Christians – even those who take seriously Jesus' statement about the rich – not to like, respect or admire rich people. In fact, rich

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 22: 7 – 13    <sup>2</sup> Luke 19: 1 – 10

people may be decent, hard-working, honest, friendly, likeable people. They may be generous and many of them the kind of people whose company we would enjoy. They might even do great and good things with some of their wealth. There is no reason for us not to acknowledge this, and to appreciate the talents and virtues of rich people. When Jesus looked at the rich man “he loved him”. He saw in him a person he instinctively liked and a character he welcomed and wanted to encourage. For Jesus, the rich man would have been a natural friend.

Of course, the question can be asked, and it usually is asked, Who are the rich? What constitutes being rich? And it’s usually asked as a way of nullifying any consequence of Jesus’ words. It’s rightly pointed out that just about all of us in the developed world (pretty well anyone with sufficient leisure to write or to read this book for example) count as rich – even very rich – by world standards. And it seems to be hoped that that will put a stop to any further discussion, as if it didn’t, in fact, make discussion all the more urgent.

Perhaps it’s possible to turn the question on its head. Instead of asking who is rich in order to find out who is not qualified for the kingdom of heaven, we could ask who is unable to go into the kingdom and so to learn if their problem is that they are the rich. I might ask “Why am I unable to enter?” and so learn to see myself as richer than I realised.

Some years ago, I read of a poor, black Christian congregation under South Africa’s Apartheid regime. It was an account of people whose faith and joy was strong in spite of their oppression, a story of ever-surprising hope in the midst of suffering. That joyful hope, a happy, confident looking to the future, struck me as something painfully absent from our own churches, even those that showed a sincere interest in world-wide justice and peace. I felt that here there was something, a presence of God, that we were without. We could only look on in wonder at the extraordinary manifestation of joy in God’s glad rule. We could not join it. Their hope, their incredible kingdom trust for the future was not for us, for we, the rich, are not able to pay the price.

I began to understand why it is that our churches are nearly always hope-less – only sometimes joyless, or even loveless, but nearly always hope-less: without hope before an invading world that demands our adherence to the decrees of money and outlaws radical change in our lives. We decry the injustice of the world, its pain and its cruelty, but we cannot bring ourselves to believe in a way out of it this side of eternity. Even when we have enthusiasm, swept on by renewal or revival, we don’t have hope – not the vigorous, sustaining hope that holds up and stands up, to change an evil world. There is something about the joy and the hope of the Christian poor, in countries where they are really poor (tho I am not pretending there is always joy and hope among the poor – there is often black, hopeless misery) but where by the power and rule of God there is that hope and purpose, there is a kingdom we can only admire and long for. We can no more get into it than a camel can get thru the eye of a needle, because our wealth, the possessions and advantages that seem so necessary to us, are more than we can let go of.

So it isn’t, after all, a matter of deciding who is rich and therefore debarred from the kingdom of heaven. It’s a matter of glimpsing the kingdom at last, the blessed freedom

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from status and property that it holds out to us, the great hope discovered there by those who have nothing else to hope by – and realising then, that it strikes us more like a threat than an opportunity – a demand we have to dispute, to protect ourselves from, an aberration against which we have to restore our more normal way of believing. And so we learn that we are the rich, in property and security, who cannot give these up though we find no other way into the hope and joy of the kingdom.

Our churches, the churches of the rich world, have many good men and women among their members. They are faithful, loving and generous. They believe many things, and they admire – they so deeply admire! – the kingdom of God. But we cannot get into it – not yet. For we are still rich.

When Jesus saw the rich man go away, he saw him turning from something he could at once have entered. He was deciding against a present offer, and Jesus realised that that was how it is for the rich. Sinners and outcasts, the poor and the prostitutes, are finding their way into the kingdom: it is there for them and they take it. But the rich see the open door and close it, fearing the draft. The question is not about a judgement to descend on the rich after death and the loss of some future opportunity of entering the kingdom. It is about present possibilities, God's kingdom already appearing here in our times, and the utter inability of the rich to join it.

I guess it might come as a relief to some of the rich to discover that it is the present reality of the kingdom that they cannot enter. If that is what it means, I might just have to be content with leading a good and believing life here, so that, in the life hereafter, when wealth no longer matters, I will be able to enter the kingdom. I would be deluding myself. No one can deny that everything is possible to God, and many, or some, may be turned to trust in him at last even after a lifetime of turning away. But I cannot count on it. If again and again in my life as a rich admirer of Jesus I turn away from the real offer of the kingdom, will even God, in the end, find anything left to work on – anything in me that would even want to live in the kind of kingdom God rules? Will there then be anything in me that does not turn away from heaven as decidedly as I have, in all my life, turned away from the kingdom here?

Mammon, or Money, is the last remaining idol – the last rival to God that we still allow to make divine claims upon us. All other false gods have been unmasked and shown for what they are: demons of evil or merely attractive human traits and possibilities once projected as divinities. The job had been done before Jesus' time, at least in Israel. Earlier prophets had had to speak out and fight against a number of supposed gods worshipped in Israel. The heroes and martyrs of the Maccabean period endured torture and death for refusing the claims of their rulers' gods. But Jesus never had to warn against any false god except Mammon: money. In every other case, at least among the Israelites, the battle had been won. It seems that no Jew was even tempted any more to believe in the puerile gods of Greece and Rome. Money alone, in Jesus time, could claim them and rule them as a god.

And so it is still. In much of the world, certainly in the Christian, ex-Christian and Muslim worlds money is the one rival to god still accorded divine status. What do I mean by that? I mean that money alone is accorded absolute authority, to be the ultimate and overriding arbiter of all our activity, to be the final test of rational, practical and allowable behaviour. The money markets, like the divine temples of

old, are not taxed; the flow of wealth from currency to currency is seen not to be driven by mere speculation, but to move with divine irresistibility as judgement bestowing rewards for good performance and punishment for bad. If workers withdraw their labour – go on strike – they are seen as disruptive and irresponsible. If investors withdraw their capital, however disruptive the ensuing chaos, they are seen to be following the not-to-be questioned dictates of profit. Their action being godlike, the blame for any harm it causes must be sought elsewhere (often in the same people who are blamed for withdrawing labour). When capital is invested, the capitalists are the saving heros. When capital withdraws, it's the fault of disruptive labour or ineffective government – not of capital; because money, and decisions based on macro-financial considerations, are above blame.

It is this conviction - that the workings of money are above criticism and beyond resistance, that those who can give financial reasons for their action have successfully appealed to the ultimate authority - which shows that we are, in fact, treating money as a god. And it's not the rich and powerful manipulators of money who offer the worship. They possibly know better. It is the mass of us ordinary citizens, taxpayers and voters, who, enamoured of money in our own little way, bow to the rulings and the dictates of the gurus, and consent to live overawed by their decisions. They tell us, and we believe, that the ultimate threat is financial disruption, that the most serious error is to doubt the wisdom of decisions justified by economics, that the unforgivable sin is to upset the priests of the god, alarming the markets by devoting money to anything other than the making of money, or presuming to regulate the flow of finance, and intruding moral or humane considerations. We bow to the unchallengeable will of a god: our moral and communal aspirations stand back, giving precedence to the purposes of money. We accept that any other good we may do will be dependent on the good will of money.

It is not our love of money, but its absolute priority and unquestioned authority over all decisions that makes it our god. It's more than being excluded from the kingdom of God: it's finding, outside, that we are prey to an idol, summoned to worship by a servile and enslaving media, made to yield all other hopes and values to the commandments of the economy and subordinate them to money. As a god, money is able to lay down rules with dire and inescapable penalties. Challenged by the divine rights of money, the absolute value of profit and the absolute laws of property, mere human rights, hopes and even lives, as to a god, will have to be sacrificed.

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There is another dodge around the teaching of Jesus. When Jesus made his observation on the rich, his disciples threw up their hands. He was setting impossible standards. Not unwisely, they suspected there might be other insupportable sacrifices required of the human ego, and in the end, virtually no-one would be able to get into the kingdom of heaven. Jesus replied: "Yes, it is humanly impossible. But nothing is impossible to God."

A lot of Christians have seized on this as an excellent cop-out. The rich are ok after all – it's humanly impossible for them to get into the kingdom, but God can manage even the impossible. That's nonsense, of course. Jesus does not speak without thinking, only to take back his words when they prove to be a problem. The disciples

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rightly see that if the sacrifice of wealth is required, there won't be many who make it into the kingdom, but Jesus does not say "All right then, God will find a way, even for those who don't give up their wealth." Jesus, with his disciples, recognises the impossible struggle it is for us to give up our money and its security, and his answer is that God will find a way thru that impossibility. God will find a way of bringing even some of the rich to the point where they are ready to give up their wealth and its advantages, to enter the kingdom of heaven. The day will come when the Spirit of God will so move hearts that pockets will be emptied and even the rich will throw away their wealth to hurry into the kingdom.

The rule of the Messiah is good news – even for the rich. But it's not the news that the rich will be able after all to find a niche, with their property and their advantages, within his kingdom. The good news is that when, as Miriam foresaw, they are sent packing, hungry and empty, some of them will realise that they are empty, and, turning back, will find that the love and mercy of God is still with them, to take the crushing weight of wealth off them and to welcome them too into his kingdom.

It's a shock to our systems, of course, but in the end it's not so difficult to see why it's impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Whatever is the actual standard that constitutes being "rich", the actual level of wealth, it means having such control of money and other resources that, more than others around us, we can take the decisions and make the moves that are to our advantage. Others have to put up with what they can get. We can select our home in the more desirable areas; we can send our children to the more costly schools or pay for their higher education; we can drive a car and eschew public transport; we can surround ourselves with the things we want. In short we can insulate ourselves from the world that has little choice: people who have to live where their housing is provided, with the neighbors they're given, who have to take the neighborhood school, who have to wait, or to go without when they want. I'm not talking here about fabulous wealth and dire poverty – only the fact of separation between the well-off and the poor in any society, and that the separation is the ability of the well-off to make their own choices as others can not.

It is that separation which blocks their way into the kingdom of heaven. The option to stay rich, to keep those resources which others do not have, using them to maintain your separate and superior freedom of movement, your control over events that others just have to accept, is your choice to stay outside the kingdom of God. Holding on to wealth, even modest wealth, which puts you above the people of your own city and world, in a position of greater control – even if your aim is to do good from that position of control – is to turn down the Messiah's offer of a kingdom which is essentially sharing, where the freedom is for everyone and nobody wants a private freedom.

What can we do, we who are rich? I believe the Messiah's offer is made still in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and that it is now more urgent than ever. We are challenged to take up that offer and to find new ways of sharing, in solidarity with the poor. If it is any help, I don't think that Jesus is telling all of us to do a St. Francis and cast off everything at once, walking naked from the house. That may be his challenge to some, and if so, blessed are they. But I believe that his challenge to all of us is to reverse the direction of our lives (to repent) in favour of the poor.

If we believe in him we will begin to do as he says – to redistribute our resources in favour of the poor. We will begin by giving something, and we will start looking for other ways in which we might live on still less and give still more. We will recognise that it is a learning process, but a promising and exciting one. We might not sell up all our property and distribute the money at once, but we might, instead of moving up the ladder of mortgage and prestige, deliberately go down a rung or two – to a cheaper house in a cheaper area, freeing up a “surplus for distribution”. Or if we’re in the habit of redecorating every three years, we might cut it back to five. Or we might start our own wealth tax – 50% of everything we spend above basic needs to go to the poor. There are 1001 ways in which we, the rich, might begin to respond to the Messiah’s invitation – the important thing is that we begin, because if we do, he himself will lead us on from there.

If we respond to him with trust we will not be dreading each thing we give up, hoping that this will be the last and that now, finally, we will have met the conditions. Rather, we will see it as an adventure in which, to go this far with Jesus the Messiah is the happy prelude to going further, as soon as he shows us how. Jesus knew the fears and misgivings of the rich, and rather than demands, he offered them hope and encouragement:

Don’t be afraid, you little flock of sheep, for your Father wants to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give your money to the poor. Open a bank account in heaven, where inflation never eats it away and speculators can’t undermine its value. Since your heart will always be fixed on your treasure, let it be treasure in heaven. (Luke 12: 32 – 34)

If we are willing to trust Jesus and to believe what he says, we can begin, even if we don’t yet see how we will go the whole way. The Messiah is willing to teach us and God wants to encourage us, so we may indeed start by losing our fears, and when we have lost our fears, we will find that we are able to learn. Instead of grudgingly giving a bit and hoping to draw the line there, we will find ourselves welcoming every insight that opens up new ways of fulfilling the Messiah’s vision.

Ours will be a commitment of faith, of trusting Jesus enough to take him at his word and try his way. If we see this giving away to the poor not as a once-for-all feat accomplished, but as a process, it may even be that while we’re still on the way, still learning to give up our wealth, we will find ourselves met and surprised by the Lord, and already beginning to discover the life, the companionship and the hope of the kingdom.