

## Money, camels and needles: Mark 10:17-31

Harvest Thanksgiving, Sunday 11 October, 10.30 am Cathedral Eucharist

It's Harvest and so it's certainly a day to open a bottle despite these recently being banned in public – well at least in the city of Manchester!

[open a bottle of champagne, pour a glass and begin to drink it]

The poet ee cummings captures this gratitude:

'i thank You God for most this amazing  
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes'

Early each morning, I go to Knighton Park with the dog and despite the anxieties about the day, the tricky meetings or mounting volumes of work, not to mention the domestic chores as yet unattempted, I reconnect there with nature. I glimpse again the blessings of my life and I perceive afresh the generosity of God.

There is a well known African story about a family who were very excited awaiting their first child. The child arrived, a little girl so they named her 'Blessings' in their traditional language. Another child arrived 18 months later, another little girl so they named her 'More Blessings'. In due course, two more gifts were received, girl number three was 'More and More Blessings' and girl number four was 'Yet more blessings'. The couple loved their children but they would have quite liked a boy too. Out of the blue as it were, mum fell pregnant for a fifth time. The precious gift was another girl, so definitively she was named 'Enough Blessings'.

[cheers to our many blessings – drink some more champagne]

We meet a character in today's reading who by most assessments is well and truly blessed. He is described in Mark 10 as 'having many possessions'. Having just moved house, I recognise the description! Princess Diana is reported once to have said 'They say it is better to be poor and happy than rich and miserable, but how about a compromise like moderately rich and just moody?' That description sits rather more comfortably yet the truth is that most people in this society – but not all – fall into the category of the man in the gospel who meets Jesus. We and he possess a lot yet we can miss the real gift of life. The commandments –even if quoted inaccurately as here in Mark – recall this man to the real depths and contours of blessing. And he recognises that his life and his things have really got in the way. Like the parable of the sower, the good seed failed to flourish, choked by daily concerns and dies. So the man grieves. But he grieves on behalf of us all. The story moves to the disciples – poor itinerant fishermen and labourers – we discover that they too cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven with the clutter of their lives. The point is that no one can! Jesus famously says how difficult it is for a camel to enter the eye of the needle, it's as tricky as a rich man entering God's Kingdom.

[more champagne needed!]

Countless commentators and preachers have sought to soften this. Most famously, people argued that the eye of a needle was a gate in Jerusalem that could actually take a camel even though it was a squeeze. No such gate ever existed. Jesus is simply pointing out just how impossible it is for everyone to enter God's kingdom. It's like trying to squeeze an elephant into a mini cooper. It's

ludicrous! Jesus is a ludicrous gift of expansive, generous proportions. As Mark says 'for mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible'. No act of obedience or service can earn this gift but those who live in response to this gift with expansive generosity find it easy to fit in with God's generosity. They will as it were find eternal life a comfortable reality – so much so that the natural jealousies which would complain about the first being last or the last first get set aside. Just think about that in terms of today's Leicester Marathon and we see just how alternative God's generosity is.

I find generosity to be hugely attractive, transforming and converting. It is the currency of heaven. I recall one of my first visits to the Eastern Cape in South Africa which has the highest poverty and HIV/AIDS rates in Southern Africa. The village of Illingie was set up during the apartheid years as a township to send prisoners to on their release from Robben Island so that were out of the way. I sat in a little shack on the only plastic chair – the makulu (grandmother) insisted! She was unwell herself, looking after her grandchildren because her daughter had already died from AIDS leaving 3 orphans and her other daughter was the other side of the curtain nearing death too, leaving behind more children. It was dire but Granny insisted I sat on the chair whilst she sat on the floor. And more movingly, she insisted that I shared their food – simple maize and spinach yet one of the most extraordinary and bountiful feasts I have ever shared. I left that home scarred by abundant generosity and grace which to this day calls into question my meagreness of heart and wallet. She spoke about welcoming the stranger because that is what Christ said. That place could have been scarred by hatred, indifference or meagreness instead it was generosity personified.

Generosity is a Christian discipline that needs to be learnt and practiced like any other life skill or spiritual calling. It is one of the prime ways that we in the affluent west learn to be disciples. It is good for us. We need to learn it through boom and bust. Church goers are significantly more generous than many others within our society but a careful analysis also reveals consistently that it is the poorest parishes which are proportionately the most generous. The more resources we have, the more choices we can make over clothing and houses and cars and schools but we become so used to them that we no longer see these things as choices. Our lives get rather more cluttered and it actually gets harder to appreciate our blessings. It's often easier to see when you have less.

[pour another glass]

We are in the middle of our ThanksGIVING campaign. Your pack tells you that 53% of our money comes from the Church Commissioners – a staggering £276,000. The national church is incredibly generous towards us. I've just come here from a parish church in London, like most of the churches of this diocese who did not receive one penny from the national church. Our regular attendance was not dissimilar to here, indeed maybe less, yet we raised triple or more than the regular giving at this cathedral.

At a training day for those new to cathedrals, we were looking at the accounts of a bigger neighbouring cathedral yet with the chunk of money given by the regular congregation similar to here – about 10% of our budget. I asked why it seems that cathedral congregations give proportionately less than parishes churches – I was simply told 'they do'. I can't accept that as a satisfactory answer. Our call as Christians invites us to explore how we can learn ever more expansive generosity. In the parish we found that the more we carefully gave away, the more people wanted to be generous. It was infectious!

Our ThanksGiving appeal invites us all to consider our generosity – that will be different for each of us – and to complete a response, whether that is to join as a regular giver, revise our giving up or down or to actively decide not to give. So far we've had about 10 responses. The target

indicates that we need a minimum additional pledge including Gift Aid of £44,000 but even that would still leave us about another £150,000 to raise in order to match the generosity of the national church to us.

When people visit a Sikh Gurdwara or Hindu Temple they very often speak not so much about the colours or smells or images but instead they talk about their experience of generosity. When people come to church and to this cathedral, will that be the case too? Of course that is about a smile and a handshake but it's about our bank accounts too because they enable outreach, decent facilities, heat and light, posters and leaflets, wine, music and loo paper!

At harvest we are reminded of our blessings and we are called to deeper generosity.

It has felt odd to drink a delicious bottle of champagne by myself – the wonderful blessings of life are even better when they are shared.

Camels do not go through eyes of needles, we can't buy our way in with money or deeds but with God all is possible and all is already given abundantly. And like the makulu in her shack, generosity scars you but with grace and it is joyous.

So 'come ye thankful people come, raise the song of harvest-home' Cheers! Slante!

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