

Year B

Mark 10:17-31

This is a fascinating passage of Scripture. The image of the camel trying to squeeze through the eye of the needle dominates our thoughts. It's an absurd image, isn't it? The Greek word for camel, *kamilos*, and one of the Greek words for rope, *kamiilos*, are so similar, and the same applies in Aramaic, that some have suggested Jesus was misheard: a rope through the eye of a needle fits metaphorically in a way that a camel doesn't. However, I wonder if Jesus well-

developed sense of the absurd was a factor here and so we mustn't part with the camel prematurely! Regardless, the point is the impossibility for those reliant on wealth to enter the kingdom of God. Now, that should cause us at least a little unease and maybe even more than that, a bit of anxiety, because we're all basically in the rich young ruler league as far as Jesus would be concerned.

In 2017 *The Daily Telegraph* newspaper printed the following short article.

“The Church of England’s investment fund saw “stellar” returns of more than 17pc last year.

The £7.9bn fund is managed by the Church Commissioners for England body in order to “support the Church of England as a Christian presence in every community”.

The body said the 17.1pc return on investments during 2016 far exceeded targets, and was more than the double the 8.2pc it made in 2015.

The fund has an average return of 9.6pc each year across the past three decades, while first church estates commissioner Sir

Andreas Whittam Smith said last year's return was partly a reflection of the depreciation of sterling.

The Church Commissioners added that it had strong returns from investments in global equities, private equity, residential property and timberland.

"Contributing to this stellar outturn was a strong showing by global equities (+32.9%), partly reflecting the depreciation of sterling," Sir Andreas said.

"The combined property portfolios delivered a creditable 11.6% in a relatively weak market

environment. Consistency has truly been a guiding principle for the fund."

Secretary and chief executive of the Church Commissioners, Andrew Brown, said they contributed £230.7 million to the mission of the Church of England in 2016.

"This represents an increase on the previous year of 5.6%," he said. "While this is only around 15% of the Church's overall income - most funding comes from the extraordinary generosity of parishioners - we are delighted to be able to play our part.

"Whether funding city centre churches, community projects in low-income areas or

research programmes to examine how the church can grow, these returns make a tangible difference to the lives of thousands across the country."¹

Very recently, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Very Reverend Justin Welby, has been in the news strongly criticising *Amazon* for not paying sufficient taxes whilst the aforementioned investment portfolio includes a significant investment in *Amazon*. Cries of hypocrisy have been heard as a result. I have referenced the Church of England because they are in the news and the details

¹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2017/05/21/church-england-enjoys-stellar-returns-investment-fund/>

are easy to find but I'm sure there would be similar issues in our own church. The issue is a good deal more complicated than what the popular press and media have made of it but as in all cases the church must be open to be judged by the word of God and sometimes that word is spoken most clearly by the secular media. In this fascinating Gospel text Jesus makes reference to interest; to dividend returns, but in unorthodox ways that cause us to sit up and take notice.

The young man came to Jesus with a straightforward question. 'What must I do to

inherit eternal life?’ Now, we have become used to that kind of question. Certainly within the evangelical Christian tradition in which I was raised that question and the subsequent answer would be at the heart of practically every sermon I heard preached. There was a very strong emphasis on personal salvation. It seemed that every Scriptural text, regardless of theme or complexity, would be reduced to answering the fundamental question; ‘am I saved?’ And that’s fine until we read our text in Mark’s Gospel this morning and we discover that Jesus will not entertain answering the

question on the young man's terms. The young man was looking for re-assurance. He knew the answer deep down himself, or he thought he did, and so Jesus would make him feel better by simply confirming it. And it started off so well with the tick list of commandments to be adhered to. No problem; he could and had managed all that. Then Jesus clean bowled him with an offer he was not willing to accept.

It's very interesting the way Jesus treats in parallel the issues of our attitude to wealth and our attitude to salvation. The two sit

side by side because they offer an equivalent judgement on our personal motivation.

The Olympic Games took place in Mexico in 1968. The marathon was the final event on the program. The Olympic stadium was packed and there was excitement as the first athlete, an Ethiopian runner, entered the stadium. The crowd erupted as he crossed the finish line.

Way back in the field was another runner, John Stephen Akwhari of Tanzania. He had been eclipsed by the other runners. After 16 miles his head was throbbing, his muscles were aching and he fell to the ground. He

has serious leg injuries and the officials wanted him to retire, but he refused. With his knee bandaged Akwhari picked himself up and hobbled the remaining 7 miles to the finish line. An hour after the winner had finished, Akwhari entered the stadium. All but a few thousand of the crowd had gone home. Akwhari moved around the track at a painstakingly slow pace, until finally he collapsed over the finish line.

It was one of the most heroic efforts of Olympic history. Afterwards, asked by a reporter why he had not dropped out,

Akwhari said, “My country did not send me to start the race. They sent me to finish.”

Our motivation is critical for the direction in which we will try to follow Jesus. Jesus warned about attention being directed towards wealth accumulation because wealth causes us to rely on ourselves. Jesus warned about attention being directed towards our virtue and faith because we must rely on ourselves. Just like the Good Samaritan, faith is demonstrated in the act of sacrificial giving to the destitute. It is in the giving away to the poor that we find

Christ, not in our claim that we are reliant upon him as our Saviour.

All of this may sound impossible; but what did Jesus say? “For God, all things are possible.”²

So we’re faced again with camels and needles! It’s all very unsettling, isn’t it? Good, because it has to be to hit home and Jesus was an expert at hitting the target. May his word continue to speak to us. Amen.

² Mark 10:27