

## 14 October 2018 – Mark 10:17-31, Hebrews 4:12-end.

AIM: *Whom do you trust?*

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Every Thursday evening, I go to a swimming class. We are a mixed bunch of adults of varying ability who meet to improve our fitness and stamina. The teacher usually teaches children and many of us are parents. One of the things I like about it is that I can share with Hannah what I have done so that she is ready for her lesson on Friday.

Because we follow broadly the same lesson plan as the children, we also get to do the “fun” part at the end. Last Thursday, had you been at the swimming pool at Badminton school, you would have seen 12 grown men and women in teams diving to the bottom of the pool trying to collect as many toys as possible. We can be quite competitive, and we piled up our trophies for inspection. The teacher looked down and then, to our dismay, picked up a plastic lobster saying, “Whoever has the lobster is the winner.” I’m not sure she ever actually said that the aim of the game was to pick up as many toys, as possible. We had been so busy doing what we thought we were supposed to do, that we hadn’t stopped to consider what was really required to win. I think the young man in our reading today is a bit like that. He knew what he wanted but not how to get there. Unlike the swimming class, he at least, had an inkling that more was required.

This is a story which occurs in three of the four gospels. By looking at all three accounts, we learn that the man was not only rich, but a ruler. A man of some standing in the community, yet he ran to meet with Jesus and knelt before him, disregarding the convention that he would carry himself with poise and dignity at all times. In each account, the story comes immediately after the episode in which Jesus welcomes children. He encourages the disciples to receive the kingdom of God as a little child. The young man’s behaviour is almost childlike. You can feel some of his enthusiasm as he approaches Jesus with his question, *‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’* In Matthew he asks, “What good deed must I do?” He knows he has kept the law, he thinks he knows the sort of things that are required, and he believes he is up to the challenge. Jesus does not disappoint (yet), advising him to keep God’s commandments. Enthusiasm bubbles forth again, his reply could be paraphrased, “I’ve done that, what else?”

The passage from Hebrews describes the word of the Lord as sharper than a two-edge sword. Jesus’s reply that this rich young man should sell all he owned, give the money away and follow him certainly cut the man to the core and he left grieving knowing that that was not something he could do. The disciples were astounded. One translation says they were perplexed. They had been brought up in the Jewish tradition in which wealth and prosperity were associated with a righteous life. If a wealthy man couldn’t get into the kingdom of heaven, then who could?

The image of a camel (the largest animal known to the disciples) and a tiny needle is preposterous. Some have tried to explain it by saying the eye of the needle is a gate, or that there is a misunderstanding of the language used. This seems to me to dilute the message too much or, as one commentary put it, to fail to appreciate Jesus’s sense of humour. His message, that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God, may have been interesting to the disciples, who had little themselves. For us, in an affluent area of a wealthy country, it is more than a little uncomfortable. The double-edged sword is at work again. I should mention that Jesus does not say everyone should sell all they own to follow him. Jesus met other rich people and didn’t require this. But for this man, his wealth got in the way of the need to put God first. The danger lies not in having riches, but in our trust and reliance on them. We are at risk of placing our confidence in material things and expect protection and provision from them rather than from God. Difficult questions, such as how we handle money, are not something we can resolve ourselves. The answers lie not simply in what we do. The answers are to be found in who we trust. Our actions are a response to that trust. Jesus says that we should trust God. *‘For God, all things are possible’*

When I was expecting twins, I had this verse stuck on my kitchen cupboard. A friend had given it to me written on a brown luggage label, knowing that I was a little anxious about what was in store. It stayed there so long that it became quite literally, part of the furniture. But every now and then, amongst the chaos that twin babies can bring, I would be comforted by it and think, 'Yes, its ok, God is in control.' Whilst I have no wish to limit God's great power and grace, I'd like to suggest three ways that God makes possible the impossible. You may think of others.

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, God can do anything. He created the laws of science and nature, but he doesn't have to abide by them. If God wanted a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, he could make it happen. People can and do experience miracles. By definition, they are unusual, and maybe we don't talk about them as much as we should, but I am sure there are people here today who can speak of times when God has done something extraordinary which cannot be explained by science or nature.

My own experience happened here on a day like today when my own twins were baptised. The date coincided with their first birthday and my husband's 40<sup>th</sup> birthday so we made it into a big family celebration. As it got closer to the day, I had a nagging feeling that things couldn't work out. There simply wasn't enough time between the end of the service and the time we had asked people to come, to feed the twins, make sure they had a nap, do all I needed to do for lunch and keep everyone happy. Yet when it came to the day, it was fine. Everything got done, with time to spare. I thoroughly enjoyed and participated in the celebrations. You could explain it by saying people helped out and I was over anxious, both of which are true. But I am convinced that that hour before lunch was stretched. Like the feeding of the five thousand, God provided. Not food on this occasion, but a gift of time.

A second way God makes things possible is through his creation. Our world is amazing. The laws of nature will not allow a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, but did you know that an octopus can squeeze through a hole the size of its beak? God has made us to evolve. With advances in medicine, exploration and technology. Many things once believed to be impossible can now be achieved.

Lastly God can show us a way through a particularly difficult situation. I am told that the Greek word for camel is very close to the word for a thick rope. This would be very hard to thread. You might need to unravel the strands as the man had to be unravelled from his wealthy lifestyle. Alternatively, some say that the eye of the needle was a very narrow gate. A camel could just get through it, but only if all the baggage associated with wealth was taken off. These interpretations have a place and can be helpful. Although I still suggest that for the whole picture we must not lose sight of the literal reading of the passage. We are told in Hebrews that the Word is living and active. We study bible texts precisely because they speak to us as much in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as they did in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Meditating on and studying God's word can help us see things in a different way. In this case we are reminded that we can hand over to God those things that burden us and try and extricate ourselves from worldly and materialistic ways.

Our world is changing rapidly. We all face challenging questions as we work out our faith. We must all make hard choices, not just about money, but about the environment, politics and economics. How can we do this in a distinctly Christian way? How can we encourage others?

Jesus once described the kingdom of God like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. If I were to play the swimming game again, I would approach it differently. I would make sure my goggles were clear, take a deep breath and dive to the bottom of the pool. I would disregard the balls, the hoops, the fish and other assorted sea creatures and all my attention would be on that lobster. Trust God and everything else will fall into place. It may not be in the way we expect or want, it may not be easy, but if we allow him to work in our lives, he will provide, and it will be the best outcome for us.

