



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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They Understood None of These Things

Luke 18:31-43

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Last week in our study of St. Luke's Gospel we saw a rich young ruler come to Jesus. He obviously saw something special in Jesus. There was something that appealed to him in what Jesus was doing or saying, but he was troubled. Jesus rebuked the people, like the Pharisees, whom everybody *knew* would take part in the kingdom of God when the Messiah came, while at the same time embracing people who were poor and unclean and sinful. Jesus told a story about a Pharisee and a tax collector and about their prayers in the temple. The Pharisee was upright and holy; the tax collector was scum and he knew it. And yet Jesus shocked everyone by telling them that it was the tax collector, who, unlike the Pharisee, admitted his sins, who went home "justified". The rich ruler was part of another class that everyone knew would be welcomed into the kingdom: the wealthy. But this man was concerned. If the Pharisees were out, according to Jesus, what about him? And so he wanted to ask, "What must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to have a part in your kingdom, Jesus?" He was used to people making way for him, but as he went to talk with Jesus people with little babies got in the way. The disciples saw him coming and tried to clear the way for him, but Jesus rebuked them saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." Now he's even more worried or more perplexed. Jesus put these lowly children of the

poor before him. That didn't bode well.

When he finally got to Jesus he asked his question and Jesus got right to the heart of the matter. Yes, this man had kept the easy commandments. He hadn't murdered anyone; he hadn't committed adultery; he wasn't a thief or a liar; he honoured his parents. But Jesus then opened his eyes to the fact that he hadn't obeyed the other table of the law. His wealth had become his god and his idol and because of that, every time he confessed the name of the Lord he was taking that name in vain. He didn't *really* trust in the Lord; at the end of the day his trust was really in his great wealth. And so Jesus told him: "If you want a place in my kingdom, sell everything you have, give it to the poor, and follow me." And Luke says that this rich ruler went away sad because he was very wealthy. He couldn't do it.

Jesus called him to *repentance*. We usually think of "repentance" only in terms of turning aside from sin, but when Jesus talks about repentance he's talking about something much broader: he's talking about turning away from anything and everything, giving up anything and everything, letting go of anything and everything that is not Jesus. Yes, we need to turn away from our sin, but we also need to turn away from any and every misplaced object of trust, whether that's sin, job, house, wealth, "stuff", family, relationship, honour, reputation, whatever. If it comes before Jesus, if it hinders our trusting one hundred per cent in him, we need to turn away from it: we need to repent. And the rich young ruler reminds us that it's not easy. For many people—for many of us—what Jesus asks us to do will hurt. Think of that wealthy young man. He went away sad. He knew what he should do; he knew Jesus was

right, but he just couldn't bring himself to give up his wealth. It was too hard; too painful.

The cost of discipleship is something we modern Christians often utterly fail to comprehend. We're wealthy and happy and we've built a church and a whole mode of evangelism meant to affirm us in our wealth and our happiness. Not only that, but it often promises us more, not less. In contrast, Jesus calls us to follow him. And not only to follow, but to *take up our crosses* and follow him and to turn aside from any and all hindrances in the process, whether wealth or false gods or even mother or father. Following Jesus is truly costly. But we also saw last week that Jesus promises so much more in return: a place in his kingdom and resurrection to eternal life in a Creation restored and made whole. Our problem is that we lack eternal perspective and so we foolishly trust in these things that moths eat and rust rots away, so afraid of letting them go that we let the glories of God's kingdom pass us by. C.S. Lewis wrote, "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." And yet we *do* know better. The rich young ruler went away *sad*; he *knew*.

The kingdom is upside-down, but if we can wrap our heads around Jesus and his mission it helps us understand. And this is the direction Jesus takes his disciples after the encounter with the rich ruler. The encounter with this man seems to have shaken the disciples and as the man left Peter was looking for assurance. He said to Jesus, "See, we have left our homes and follow you." I think that's more of a question than a statement. He was

confused by what had happened and he wanted confirmation that he and the other disciples were “okay”. Yes, the disciples did the right thing in giving up everything, but that doesn’t mean they really understood. Look at 18:31-33.

And taking the twelve, he said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.”

Jesus reminds them where they’re headed: to Jerusalem. He’s already said some ominous things about what’s going to happen there: he will be rejected by his people, he will suffer, and he will die. Jesus knew this because he’d studied the Scriptures, probably like no one had every studied them before, or at least with Spirit-guided insight the likes of which no one else has ever had. He understood God’s plan. As he read about the Son of David, the anointed one—that’s what “Messiah” means—he understood that it was reading about himself. He was to be the great King of whom David was just a shadow or a type. But he also read about the Lord’s Suffering Servant in Isaiah—the one who was to suffer and die for the sins of his people. Those two roles seem like polar opposites. Since when does a great and eternal king, who vanquishes all his enemies, suffer rejection and death? It doesn’t make any sense. And then to complicate matters even more, Jesus also understood himself to be the Son of Man from Daniel’s prophecy: the representative of the people, of Israel, who comes—or maybe, better, ascends—on the

clouds to the Ancient of Days who gives him an everlasting dominion over all peoples and nations. All these prophetic images or characters from the Old Testament come together in Jesus: the great King isn’t king of Israel alone, but of all Creation; he has everlasting dominion, but he comes into that dominion and conquers his enemies only by suffering death at their hands.

This is the way of God’s kingdom. This is the way of God’s Messiah. Why? Because as wonderful as an eternal king would be, an eternal and glorious king doesn’t solve the problem of sin and death. And as great as a king who conquers sin and death would be, the conquest of sin and death alone does not accomplish the redemption and restoration of sinners. And that’s the bit that the Jews and that the disciples couldn’t wrap their heads around. And they couldn’t wrap their heads around it because they misunderstood the kingdom and they misunderstood God’s plan. They expected the King to come in judgement on sin and sinners. It didn’t occur to them that if God did things that way they, too, would wind up judged and condemned. No, God had a better plan. He would become incarnate himself and would ascend to his throne by first dying for the sins of his people and rising in triumph over sin and death. He came not at the end of history to judge, but into the middle of history to provide redemption that we need not suffer condemnation on that day when judgement comes. This is why the Messiah had to be and could be both the great King *and* the Suffering Servant.

And yet this model doesn’t end with Jesus; he calls his people to follow in his footsteps—to give up their lives—our lives—for his sake. It’s a

call to sacrifice our all for the sake of the King. The call of the Gospel, the good news, is a call to repentance: to leave aside everything and to turn to Jesus. And then it gets worse—at least if we’re thinking with an earthly perspective—because now that we’ve given up everything, Jesus calls us to walk with him in humility, suffering, and persecution for the sake of the kingdom and for the sake of others. He brought life back to the world by his suffering and death and now he calls us to be witnesses to that light by doing the same. This is what St. Paul is getting at in the well-known passage from Philippians 2 where he writes:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5-11)

Jesus’ humbling of himself, his rejection, his suffering, and his death had to happen in order for him to be raised from the dead. He had to suffer in order to restore life to the world. And now he calls us to give up our lives—our rights, our prerogatives, our priorities, our sources of security—so that we can follow him and witness his own life-giving suffering to a world subject to death. It’s hard enough for us to

understand, so we can't really blame the disciples. Luke writes in verse 34:

But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

All of this was a *mystery*, but that's okay. God sometimes gives his people mysteries today so that he can make known his truth in profound ways tomorrow. Jesus' trip to Jerusalem was building to that kind of revelation that would happen at the cross, then at the empty tomb, and finally in an amazing and profound way at Pentecost. And yet the next thing Luke tells us about drives home this point of repentance and of giving up everything to follow Jesus. The rich ruler was unable to give up his wealth and turned away from Jesus. The next man they encounter is the polar opposite. Look at verses 35:

As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging.

The rich ruler was at the top of the social hierarchy; this blind beggar was at the bottom. The rich ruler had everything; this blind beggar had absolutely nothing. People sought out and fawned over the rich ruler; people ignored the blind beggar. And remember that for us, blindness is just blindness; to people in that time and place, blindness was considered a curse. If you were blind, you deserved it; it was God's punishment. And so this man wasn't just poor, he was ostracised in a way far beyond the way poor people are still often ostracised in our society.

But despite being blind, this man can see—not the physical world around him, but he has insight into this Jesus person he hears is coming

beyond the insight of even the disciples. Jesus *just* explained the essential nature of his ministry and of what it means to be his disciples and the disciples couldn't understand—they were blind. And yet here's a blind man who can see what they can't. Throughout Jesus' ministry it seems always to be the “wrong” people who understand him while his own people reject and scoff at him. There was the gentile Centurion (7:1-10) who understood the authority that Jesus had and was moved to faith. There was the prostitute who anointed Jesus' feet with perfume and her own tears (7:35-50). There was the Samaritan leper who came back to thank Jesus while his nine Jewish friends went their way (17:11-17). The blind beggar joins this list of distinguished outsiders. There he was begging when a crowd formed. He asked someone what was going on and was told that Jesus of Nazareth was coming through the gate. And hearing who it was the man suddenly had hope. Luke says:

He cried out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Luke 18:38)

“Son of David”. He'd heard the stories about Jesus and he knew who Jesus was. The Son of David was the Messiah, the great and eternal King whom everyone was longing for. Luke stresses this aspect of Jesus' ministry by telling us that this happened as they entered Jericho, on the road to Jerusalem. As the Son of David, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem to take his throne. And as he gets to this important waypoint, the beggar hears about him and understands. The King is on important business, but surely he will stop for me. He's come to bring good news to the poor and the blind. This is *my* King. The blind man had hope and he had hope *because he*

had faith. Imagine him calling out. But, Luke writes:

Those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Luke 18:39)

The people in the front of the crowd were the important people of the city; they were the people who thought they were the ones Jesus would want to greet and honour. And, of course, king's aren't interested in beggars. And yet the way they dismiss this poor man is the same way that Jesus dismisses the people who are sure of themselves, who are wealthy, and who are self-righteous. But the man keeps calling out. Again, he'd heard the stories. Maybe he knew the Scriptures. However he knew, he knew that Jesus was the Messiah and that he'd come to preach good news to the poor, healing to the sick, release to the captives, and sight to the blind. Of all the people there, he was the one who understood Jesus.

The people of Jericho might try to shove him to the back, but Jesus makes way for the blind man.

Jesus stopped and commanded him to be brought to him. And when he came near, he asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” He said, “Lord, let me recover my sight.” (Luke 18:40-41)

Imagine the shock of the people as Jesus asks the very people who were pushing this man to the back to now bring him up to the front. And I think Jesus knew exactly what this man wanted, but he asks. He asks because he wants everyone else to hear it. Out of the entire crowd, it was this blind man who could see that Jesus is the Son of David, the King. Out of the entire crowd, it

was this blind man who expressed real faith that Jesus is the one who will save the world. The people had heard him calling out “Jesus, Son of David!” This is Jesus’ chance to affirm not only the man’s faith in him, but to affirm the ascription of this title “Son of David” that man has given him.

The man was a beggar. He cried out to everyone, “Have mercy on me!” And for everyone else that was just a cry for money or maybe for food. But he wanted more from Jesus: “You can give me more than money, Jesus. Let me recover my sight.” And Luke says in verses 42-43:

And Jesus said to him, “Recover your sight; your faith has made you well.” And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God.

The miracle confirmed the faith of the blind man who had called out to Jesus as the Son of David, as the Messiah. The sense of expectation is heightened as Jesus goes up to Jerusalem. The word’s going to spread: the King is here to take his throne.

But notice the blind man. He was at the bottom rung of Jericho society. But Jesus didn’t heal him so that he could become a member of polite society again. He didn’t heal him so that he could return to whatever job or career he’d had before going blind. No. Jesus healed the man and the man responded by following Jesus—by becoming a disciple—and by glorifying God.

Brothers and sisters, this is what Jesus has been getting at. This is why the rich ruler couldn’t follow Jesus. He wasn’t willing or prepared to give up his life. The blind man—

St. Mark tells us his name was Bartimaeus—had already lost his life when he went blind. Jesus gives it back, but instead of returning to work and building a life for himself in Jericho, he chooses to follow Jesus and to give his life for the sake of glorifying the King. As Jesus was on his way to sacrifice his life for the sake of his people, Bartimaeus sacrificed his life—gave his all—for the sake of Jesus. He truly understood what it meant to be made whole and welcomed into the kingdom of God.

That’s what repentance looks like: letting go of everything so that we can take hold of Jesus in faith. Most of us are more like the rich ruler than blind Bartimaeus. We’re wealthy or, at least, we’re comfortable in life. We think of ourselves as already being more or less whole. Bartimaeus had nothing to lose in following Jesus. You and I have much to lose. But remember that we have everything to gain. No matter how important the things are that Jesus calls us to give up, they’re things that will not last. In return for them Jesus promises resurrection to restored and eternal life and a share in the New Jerusalem. We’re obsessed, as Lewis wrote, with making mud pies in the slum. If we will give them up, Jesus promises new life in the full presence and fellowship of God.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, you sent your Son to be King through humility, suffering, and death—all for our sake. Give us the grace to respond in humility and make our hearts willing to sacrifice our all for his sake, that we might live in repentance and be true disciples of King Jesus, through whom we pray. Amen.