

MARK SERMON SERIES – WEEK FIVE

Readings: Mark 10: 23-45; Mark 12: 38-44

So here we are, once again, looking at the gospel of Mark, week five of seven. This week, we are going to be looking at Mark chapters ten and twelve, and we are going to be thinking about salvation and what can get in the way of following Jesus, His cleansing of the temple, and the story of the widow's mite.

Our first reading from Mark chapter ten today has two parts to it, but in essence they both focus on what gets in the way of following Jesus. The first few verses suggest it may be our wealth, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God" Jesus says. Wealth is, of course, a relative term. We may not think of ourselves as being particularly wealthy here in Caversham compared to some other parts of the county or country, but compared to most people in the world who live on less than \$2 a day, we are. So is our relative wealth a barrier to our following Jesus, does it make it impossible indeed? Well, the answer from Jesus is an emphatic no, since for God, "all things are possible". Thankfully, our salvation is dependent upon God, and not upon us. We are saved by God in order that we might follow his son Jesus. But given that fact, might our relative wealth get in the way of our following Jesus? And I think the answer to that question is that it can – remember the story of the rich young ruler who turned away from following Jesus when he said to him, "Go, sell all that you have and give the money to the poor". There is nothing wrong with having money per se, though how we gain it at the hands of others may be morally dubious (thinking of where our pensions may be invested for example), but how we use the money we have been given is important. Are we greedy with our money, hoarding it up for ourselves (if so remember the story Jesus told of the man who kept his riches in bigger and bigger barns until one night he died and could do nothing with it), or are we gracious about it, ensuring that we have not only enough for ourselves, but are also able to be generous to others, especially those in need? And if our relative wealth might get in the way of following Jesus, so too can our desire for status. Throughout its history, there have always been those who have sought positions of high authority, high status within the church (and indeed other institutions) for the wrong reasons – for self-aggrandisement, for example. But Jesus reminds James and John, and the rest of the disciples, that true greatness comes from serving others, not lording it over them as we were also reminded in last week's readings. True greatness for the followers of Jesus will inevitably involve drinking the cup of his suffering and being baptised into his death (as well as his resurrection). It will involve persecutions (as well as the blessings of a new spiritual community to belong to). As the Garfield poster of that well known cat setting off down a mountain on his skis puts it, 'No guts, no glory'. (*show picture*).

Then, in our second reading from Mark chapter twelve, Jesus turns his attention to the scribes once again. Having previously criticised them elsewhere in this gospel for their teaching, he now condemns them for their practices as showy, greedy and hypocritical. The reference to devouring the houses of widows' may be referring to an abuse of hospitality offered to them, taking rich fees from pious services, or the harsh pressing of their rights as creditors (topical in view of the current situation in Greece perhaps?). Either way, Jesus is not happy and says they will receive the greater condemnation for their practices. And then we have this interesting story concerning the treasury. The treasury refers to the money chests which were against the wall in another of the courts (the Court of Women) in the temple where all would place their offerings. If only copper coins were

allowed to be placed in these, the a large contribution would have made a good deal of noise (just like some of the money receptacles you get in certain churches today which make a good clunk as you put money into them). And Jesus notes the significance of the poor widow's sacrificial contribution, whose two small coins were worth far more than the large sums put in by the rich. For she was giving out of the little she had, compared to the abundance they had.

So what challenges do today's readings throw up for us here in twenty first century Caversham? Let me suggest two. Firstly, a word about salvation. The first reading made it clear that salvation is the gift of God; it is not something that we can earn or deserve. But our response to God's salvation in Jesus does depend on us. We can choose to follow Jesus, or to let other things like our wealth or our status to get in the way. Will we accept the free offer of his grace, his undeserved favour, that says even though you have made a mess of things, I am willing to forgive you and enable you to make a fresh start with your life? And if you have already said yes to God, whenever that was, then you are still invited by him to say 'yes', to turn to him and to follow his Son Jesus daily. For salvation and our response to it is a process – we have been saved, we are being saved, we will be saved. We may have chosen to follow Jesus, we can choose to follow Jesus now, we can choose to follow Jesus in the future. Secondly, what is the nature of our personal giving to God? Are we giving sacrificially, like the widow, or from what we don't miss, like the rich people in the story? A sacrifice is something that hurts. Is our giving pain-full or pain-free? In my experience, when church members are giving sacrificially, great things can be achieved in the life of a church since money is freed up to be used for the Kingdom of God.

Let us pray..

Almighty God, you loved the world so much that you gave your only Son Jesus so that everyone who believes in him (who trusts in him) might have eternal life - life with you both now and forever. Help us to respond wholeheartedly to your love for us in Jesus, whether for the first time, or the umpteenth time, and may we know the power of your Holy Spirit to help us as we seek to follow him. Amen.

If you would like to talk to me about your response to this sermon afterwards, please feel free to do so.