

SERMON FOR TRINITY 19 2015
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People have always been uncomfortable with many of the stark images that appear in the Gospels.

Art has taken the edge off them.

Take the birth of Jesus.

The squalor of the cow-shed is romanticised until it is a ruin in a rustic setting, the characters wearing the apparel of fifteenth century gentry.

And representations of the crucifixion never convey adequately the horror of this method of execution.

It's as if the reality is too much to bear.

In the same way images that have always been largely verbal are taken and explained away.

Thus the saying that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of God.

First people began to say that the word *καμηλος* - camel - was a mistake for *καμιλος*- a cable or thick rope.

And then the legend grew up that there was a narrow gate through the walls of Jerusalem known as the needle, through which a camel might just squeeze.

It won't do.

We are left with the plain, extreme statement.

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus had just had an encounter with a rich man who asked what he must do to inherit eternal life.

For the orthodox Jew in the first century the answer to that was clear.

It was necessary to keep the Law.

Clearly this wasn't enough for the man.

Otherwise the question would have been superfluous.

Jesus reminds him by summarising the ten commandments.

But the man has done all of this since childhood and still is not satisfied.

Then an extraordinary thing happens.

Jesus looks at the man and *loves* him.

In all probability he reached out and showed his love by embracing or caressing him.

The way to the kingdom, says Jesus, is to give everything you have to the poor and then come, follow me.

The shock was too much for the man and he went away grieving.

Not merely upset but *grieving*.

As if someone had just died.

To inherit eternal life was important to him, for he was devout.

But in the end his riches were more important to him.

The challenge of following Jesus and all that it entailed was too much for him.

Instead of falling into the arms of Jesus as he reached out to him he went off, broken, because his real treasure was not the kingdom but his material possessions.

So it is hard for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God.

But first Jesus says plainly that it is hard to enter the kingdom of God.

The rich have particular problems.

But it's difficult for all of us.

And it is impossible for any of us through our own efforts.

Whatever the circumstances it requires a letting go of every obstacle that stands in the way.

A willingness to recognise that we can't get there as it were by our own efforts.

The kingdom into which we are invited can only be entered because God makes it possible and not because people live good lives or keep the Law.

It is, purely and simply a gift.

The grace and unlimited power of God are the only way in.

And it is a sign of that power that lies behind the invitation Jesus makes to us all to follow him.

In Jesus God has approached us, and through him constantly invites us along the way of discipleship, which is the road into the kingdom.

To follow that road will mean leaving behind everything that threatens to obscure the importance of the call.

That's the point.

It isn't wrong in itself to be rich, any more than it is wrong to have friends and relations.

It's just that the demands of the gospel are total and nothing must stand in the way of our response to them.

Deep down, people seem to think it outrageous that we should have as a gift the love of God, who created us.

And so they dream up all kinds of things to soften the impact of that basic truth and to take away the demands of discipleship.

Excess baggage is what we end up with.

And although not many of us have so much that we want to hang on to our bank balances rather than join the Church, most of us hang on to our baggage.

Too frightened to fall into the arms of Jesus, though we might happily sing the hymn that declares we are safe in them, we mess about on the fringe.

And when people ask us about the content of our faith we spout all sorts of nonsense about living a good life and keeping the ten commandments, when the Gospel states quite clearly that that isn't enough.

It's a gift.

Jesus reaches out and embraces and caresses us!

That's all.

That's why the Church's life is built up on thanksgiving.

The battle has been won.

The door is open.

It remains for us to be constantly aware of what we owe to God, and with the efforts of our lives to begin to return his generosity.

The generosity of God.

That is at the heart of why we are christians at all.

If only we could jettison the excess baggage, the preoccupation with the irrelevant past, all the things we've grown up to put in the place of the one simple fact of God's love for us, then we could begin to share this faith, pass it on to others.

God is love, for us, on our side.

Reaching out, inviting.

A love that is infinite, perfect.

Something we can't add to.

Something we can't drive away.

Something embodied in Jesus of Nazareth.

To begin to respond is to let go, perhaps every time we hear the Gospel proclaimed, to this man who stretches out his arms in love and says 'Come, follow me.'