

## Mark 10:17-32

A while back I made a date to meet with Toby and Micah for breakfast at the Pancake Parlour in Canberra, before a Bishop in Council meeting. As we went in the door, there was a homeless woman sitting on the ground with a container in front of her, and a makeshift sign on a piece of cardboard which read, "Please Help". Now while I realise that this can be a scam, and people can in fact do very well from such begging, there are also those for whom such poverty is very real.

I watched people on their way to work walk past without so much as looking at the woman. While we were waiting for our meal I decided to go out and contribute, scam or not, but found she'd gone.

It was almost as if this woman didn't exist in affluent Canberra. It made me wonder how many of God's people are also able to switch off in the face of human need. I have to keep watching my own responses.

In our Gospel reading today, we have a picture of someone else who had been desensitised to the plight of the poor – the rich young ruler.

As I look into this passage, I see a twofold challenge - one which reveals the priorities of our faith, and another deeper challenge, which cuts to the very core of our relationship with God.

This young man wasn't unlike us. He was seen as a good person – as I hope would be the case for each of us. He recognised Jesus as someone sent by God – someone who had the clues when it came to knowing the important things of life. As Christians, we go a step further of course – we believe that Jesus is God incarnate.

The young ruler addressed Jesus as "*Good* teacher." Jesus response was interesting, wasn't it? "Why do you call me good?" he asked. "No one is good except for God alone." Was Jesus denying that he was God? Or was he perhaps using this question to focus the young man on the fact that he *was* God, and therefore the importance of what he was about to say to him? I think it was the latter. Jesus was saying to the young man, "In saying that I am good – you are recognising that I speak with the authority of God. You should therefore listen to what I have to say."

We know from a little later in this story that Jesus looked at this young man and loved him. Jesus' deepest desire was to see him able to do God's will, as he so obviously wanted to, and to find the eternal life he sought.

But there was something in the way. I think the young man knew this as well, but couldn't identify it – which was why he came to Jesus.

Let's go off at a slight tangent for moment. In our own walk with God, we can sometimes find ourselves in a similar place. Our relationship with God can cool off and become lukewarm. We can lose our passion, even lose our assurance that we count for anything in God's kingdom. It can happen over a matter of months, or years, or even a lifetime.

Jay's Uncle Dick was like that. He was estranged from his family through a divorce, and when he was in his 80s, we invited him to come and live with us in Taralga. He was a browned off Catholic, and over the years, I'd had many conversations with him about God. What faith he'd had, he said, was long gone. But it wasn't. As he became part of our family, and involved in Recory life, his faith was rekindled. He recognised that religion was more than ritual, it was a relationship, and surrendered himself to God. Before he died a few years later, he was coming to church and Bible Study every week. He'd also bought a new Bible, a huge tome on Biblical Theology, and was teaching himself New Testament Greek.

Paul tells us never to flag in zeal. How is our zeal for God? Perhaps some of us may be in a similar place to this rich young ruler this morning. It could be that we need to do some spritual reflection...

Let's see how Jesus guided this young man. He was very tactful. He gently drew the young man to the realisation that all his law-keeping wasn't the issue. "You know the commandments", said Jesus: "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honour your father and mother."

The young man assured Jesus that he'd kept them all from his youth. Had he, I wonder? One of the things Jesus was constantly challenging the Scribes and Pharisees about was their insistence on keeping myriads of little nit-picking laws yet being totally blind to the spirit of the law.

Jesus said on one occasion, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

The Pharisees had become completely desensitised to the true spirit of the law – justice and mercy and faithfulness. They ignored the plight of the poor and the sick and the oppressed, and instead concentrated on ticking boxes.

The young ruler said he'd "kept the commandments" – but there was obviously something he'd missed. He too had become desensitised to the needs around him. Yes, he'd been focussed on keeping the letter of the law – and he'd done it well. But he also had missed the heart of it.

As the young man, yearningly looked to Jesus – genuinely wanting to walk more closely with God – Jesus looked at him with compassion. I believe Jesus knew how difficult this young man’s choice was about to become...

"One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

We read that the young man’s face fell, and he went away sad because he had great wealth. He made his choice. It was his wealth. He chose to hang on to his material wealth, and so sacrificed the fulfilment he yearned for, and the treasure Jesus promised him in heaven.

It’s a sad story – but one that can speak to us.

As I said at the beginning, the young man faced two challenges.

One was that his priorities were wrong. He’d settled for obeying the letter of the law rather than embracing the spirit of the law. He’d reduced his religion to ticking boxes. In so doing, he was not able to see the world through God’s eyes or feel with God’s heart. He had become blind to the things that were the essence of the law - justice, mercy and faithfulness - and so the poor remained poor.

There’s a sense in which the rich young ruler was also the embodiment of the failure of Israel to live up to her calling. Israel was always meant to be a kingdom of priests - priests in that they mediated the justice and mercy and faithfulness of God not only to their fellow Jews, but to the surrounding nations. Israel as a nation never got her priorities right either. The letter of the law became her focus instead and the poor remained poor.

The second challenge cut even deeper. When Jesus revealed to the young man that his wealth was more important to him than God, and challenged him to put God first by giving up his wealth to help the poor and then to follow him, the young man was not able to.

Now wealth may well be an issue for many of us as first world Christians. We certainly have more in this country than a good 80% of the rest of the world. We need to seek God about that. But there could also be other things in our lives - as a church and as individuals - that have become more important to us than they should be. More important even, than God.

I hope we have the courage to ask God about that. I believe he will tell us if we do, just as he told the rich young man.

Today’s twofold challenge applies not only to the young man in the story. They are pertinent for us as well.

**We** need to realise how easily we can get our priorities skewed and become ensnared in ritual rather than true religion; how we can find ourselves going through the motions of our faith, rather than wrestling with it's challenges; how we can become desensitised like the rich young ruler, to those things which are expressions of the very heart of God - the need for social justice, mercy and faithfulness.

We also need to be aware that Jesus asks **us** to lay at his feet those things which we value the most. Not that he wishes to take them from us - though we may need to be prepared for that eventuality. Rather, Jesus wishes to bless us. We must never be afraid of surrendering our all to Jesus. We will lose nothing of any real value!

May God give us grace to rise to his challenges.

Let's pray.