

The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost Mark 10:23-31

Some, most likely, would find great delight in hearing what we hear our Lord Jesus saying today: *How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God!* In that sense you could say that it is a shame that they will not get to hear it. In that sense *also*, that is; for those who really hate the rich and would find great delight in hearing our Lord Jesus sticking it to them, and would find even greater delight in thinking of them going amiss of the Kingdom of God and suffering for ever in Hell, well, it seems that most of them tend to not go to Church all that much.

And, of course, if what you hear in what we hear today, is that our Lord Jesus shares your hatred for those who have more than yourself, or those who have about as much as yourself, but who do not have the same sense of guilt about it, and therefore do not try to compensate for being rich by hating all *other* rich people, well, if that is what you hear in what we hear our Lord Jesus saying today, then you are not really hearing what our Lord Jesus is saying today. His message is *not* one of what is called *social justice* these days, of hatred against certain kinds of people deemed to be *privileged* or otherwise *deplorable* or *irredeemable*.

From what we hear today that God has put together in immediate succession in Holy Scripture, because it actually goes together, we learn that the *riches* Lord Jesus addresses in what we hear today, well, they are not necessarily *financial* in nature: *See, we have left all and followed You!*, we hear that Peter said to Him. And our Lord Jesus responded: *Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for my sake, and the sake of the Gospel, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life.*

He does mention *house* and *lands* among that which some have given up for His sake, and for the sake of the Gospel. But then, houses can be small and dilapidated; and land lots can be both small and stony. And He also mentions *brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children*.

The point is that the *riches* of which He speaks, which make it so hard to enter the Kingdom of God, they are not necessarily associated with having lots and lots of money.

Rather, He is talking about anything and everything that is so precious to someone as to make it impossible for that someone to enter the Kingdom of God. Yes, actually *impossible*, not only *hard*. For as we hear it, when they asked Him: *Who, then, can be saved?*, He responded: *With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.*

Being rich can indeed stand in the way of entering the Kingdom of God; not so much having financial wealth as such, but rather what having financial wealth might do to a person. So often financial wealth will cause a person to be self-assured and arrogant, as will other kinds of worldly success, so that a person comes to think that he or she knows everything about everything and need not be taught by anybody, neither by God, nor by the man through whom God would teach him or her, that is: the Pastor God has set over him or her in his or her church in order for him or her to learn *from him* the ways of God.

But not only the worldly wealth one already actually has can stand in the way of one's salvation; so can also the worldly wealth one *wishes* for oneself, when one neglects to seek salvation from God in the Word and worship of His salvation and abandons the faith in order to seek instead the worldly wealth one wishes.

This happens when one neglects the Word and worship of God in order to *work* on Sundays instead, in order to obtain worldly wealth; and it happens when one abandons faithful preaching and teaching of the Truth of God to follow false preachers and teachers instead, who teach the faith as a means to obtain worldly wealth and health and happiness.

But also the love of *brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children* can stand in the way of one's salvation, when *brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children*, or friends, for that matter, do not approve of the faith, or of faithfulness to the Word and will of God, and those who otherwise want to be Christian are misled into rejecting the Word and will of God, and come to resent the faithful Church of Christ, and perhaps even ultimately to reject Holy Scripture entirely, and the faith itself, perhaps even without noticing it themselves, and God Himself, as He really is. As our Lord Jesus has also said it: *I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*

It seems, though, that the greatest threat to our salvation is the assurance of our own goodness and godliness; our Lord Jesus clearly hinted at that when Peter pointed to his own sacrifices, and those of the other Apostles, and He responded: *Many who are first will be last, and the last first!*; by these words we are reminded of what He has also said, that *many will say to me in that day: 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them: 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness!'* The false assurance of our own goodness and godliness, precious as it is to most of us, will make us to not acknowledge that I am a poor, miserable sinner, and that by my sins and shortcomings I have justly deserved His temporal and eternal punishment, and that my only salvation from eternal death and damnation is this: that God, out of His boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of His beloved Son Jesus Christ, would be gracious and merciful to me, a poor sinful being.

Preaching or teaching that inspires and instructs you to be good and godly might be precious to you, though; perhaps you grew up with it, and cannot get yourself to let go of it. Or perhaps it is precious to you because it makes you feel good to hear that *you can do it!*, it makes you feel that you are good, and makes you feel good about your goodness and godliness. But it also makes you to look to yourself and look away from our Lord Jesus and what He has done for your salvation; ultimately, it might make you lose sight of Him entirely, and your salvation!

How hard it is, says our Lord Jesus, *for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God!* And His answer to the question as to who can then be saved is that *with men it is impossible*.

Our own efforts at goodness and godliness will not actually drive away sin and ungodliness from our hearts and minds, or even from our lives; in fact, they are themselves *sinful*, and bring us under judgement and damnation with God. For they are but ungodly attempts on our part to take for ourselves that which is only for God to give, and which He will give only out of His own goodness and mercy, and not for any other reason whatsoever.

The joyful Word we also hear today, though, is that *with God all things are possible*; or as the Psalm says it: *With Him is redemption in abundance*.

With Him is full forgiveness for all our sins and shortcomings, and those of all sinners. He Himself has brought that about, and brought it to completion.

The Son of God, who is Himself God from eternity, came into this world to take upon Himself the sin of all sinners, and bear it for us, and His own judgement against it, which is eternal death and damnation, that is: the *fullness* of death and damnation, His righteous wrath against all wrong and wrongdoing, the hatred of His holiness and goodness against all evil. He was crucified for us, cursed and condemned for us, in our stead and on our behalf, as had been written of Him in the Law: *Cursed is He who is hanged upon a tree.*

And with His sufferings and death He has borne Himself the impurity and guilt of our sins and shortcomings, and taken it away from us. He has made us right with Himself, and righteous before His judgement. And He declares us to be that, in the Word He has His faithful Church proclaim, and in which He speaks Himself, and so we are that, for He is the one who shall come in glory to judge the living and the dead, and who has borne all judgement for us; and so, what He says is what goes.

And the Word He speaks to us is well worth taking to heart; for it is His promise of full forgiveness for all sin, of full and complete righteousness before His judgement, of rescue from eternal death and damnation, of eternal life with Him in the fullness of His goodness and His glory. His *promise*, yes; for He has Himself brought it to completion.

And in His Word of His love and what His love has done for us sinners, He Himself breathes His love into us, with His Holy Spirit, so that we begin to believe in Him, and to love Him, and to seek that which is His will for us.

And as we live under His Word of love, and take it to heart, we learn that a life in His love is well worth whatever comes with it, whatever sacrifices it entails. As we hear it today that He says it: *There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life.* In the communion of His Church we find a home, and *brothers and sisters and mothers and children*; moreover, we are in communion with *Himself*, as He Himself lives with us and within us. And we shall be with Him forever. And He Himself makes us to see that it is well worth the while.

Now, to Him, whose power works in us and can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, be glory, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever. *Amen.*