

Imagine that you're wanting to have a conversation  
About serious spiritual matters  
And you think to yourself: Fraser has been a pastor for some years  
He is reasonably well-versed in the Scriptures  
He seems to be generally on the level; I'll talk with him.  
And imagine that in the conversation I say,  
'You need to sell everything that you have, and give it to the poor.  
And then you need to follow *me*.'  
Well, what would you think?  
'Fraser's gone mad... he's lost it... he thinks he's *God*.'

OK. Think about what happens in today's Gospel reading,  
A man respectfully and in humility comes to Jesus.  
He has a serious spiritual question:  
He wants to be sure that he is part of that community  
That will inherit life with God.  
Jesus teaches what he teaches:  
Sell all your possessions and give to the poor,  
And he makes the call that he makes:  
Come, follow me,  
Not because he is gone mad or because he has lost it,  
But because he truly is *good*,  
Because he truly is *God*.

Today I'm proclaiming Good News from the Gospel:  
Jesus does for us what is impossible for us to do:  
He keeps the whole of the law,  
And through *his* suffering, death, and resurrection  
He has become for us *the way* to God,  
So that by faith we may be free from slavery to possessions,  
And so that we may love each other  
As we share in the generosity of God.

Listen to how the text begins: **As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey...**  
We'll pause there.

This sounds simple enough: Jesus is just travelling along.  
But more literally the text says that Jesus is going into *the way*.  
This is not simply a journey: we know *the way* that Jesus is on:  
He has already been making it clear to his disciples:  
Jesus is on the way to suffering, to the cross, to death.  
He is on the way to his resurrection on the third day.  
In other words, *the way* in Mark's Gospel is not simply a journey,  
It's the way to the cross with Jesus.

And just two examples from the same chapter of Mark about this:  
*In the very next verse* after our reading it says:

**They were going up on *the way* into Jerusalem; (10:32)**

The disciples together with Jesus were going  
To the place of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.  
And at the end of the chapter, when blind Bartimaeus is healed by Jesus,  
He sees Jesus and begins following him on *the way*. Mark 10:52.  
So, *the way* is not just any old journey,  
And as we listen to this narrative, let's keep in mind the way Jesus is going,  
And why he is going on it: to give his life as a ransom for many.

Now, back to the reading: **As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him,**

Again, let's pause and think about the body language here:  
It's the body language of someone who subordinates himself to another.  
It is the body language not of pride, but of humility:  
He *runs up* to Jesus, he *kneels* before him.  
Likewise, his words are coming from a place of humility:  
**[He] asked [Jesus], 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'**

Now in the Gospels we are regularly told  
When people are coming to Jesus with bad motives,  
To trap him or test him.  
But this man both in his body language and in his words  
Is presented as someone of sincerity and good will.  
But listen to how Jesus responds: **'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.**  
Jesus starts with a challenge to the man:  
Why are you using an epithet for me, 'good',  
That word can only rightly be used of *God*?  
What is your true confession of me? Who do you say that I am?  
We know this is a centrally important question to Jesus –  
It seems to me the central question of the Gospel,  
Jesus' question to the disciples that we hear back in chapter 8,  
**But who do you say that I am?**

After starting with the question of identity, Jesus then turns to right teaching:  
**You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother."'**  
Which of those is of place? *You shall not defraud.*  
The rest are part of the 10 commandments,  
So why does Jesus add this one in? The text doesn't say,  
But here's one possibility:  
We know that the man is asking about inheritance,  
And we know that he is very wealthy.  
He may not literally be a thief,  
And his parents may not have been literal thieves,  
But how did he come into all his money?  
At least the text raises these questions...

Notice also that the commandments that Jesus mentions  
All come from the second table: about human interactions,  
But none from the first table, about God.  
And the reason for that is about to become evident.

The man, again in respectful tones replies to Jesus: **'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.'**  
I think we're meant to take this fellow seriously,  
That he hasn't literally broken the commandments.  
The man is, at least according to the letter of the commandments,  
Someone who could say that he is a member of that community  
That keeps the law: that he can stand among those who will inherit life.

Now it's true, you can't *earn* an inheritance,  
But perhaps you *can* do something to get yourself  
Into the inheriting community, like getting adopted into a family,  
And perhaps he has kept the law well enough to have his place...

Now the text suggests that Jesus takes the man seriously,  
Because listen to how it goes on: **Jesus, looking at him, loved him**  
This is the only time in the Gospels where such an expression is used.  
It seems to me that Jesus both loves the man for who he is,

But also shows love for him by what he then says:

**'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'**

*There is the divine command, there is the divine call.*

This man is not simply dealing with a competent teacher,

Or even in a good teacher, judged by human standards.

He is dealing with God in the flesh, *and it's unbearable.*

In fact listen to how the text goes on:

**When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.**

The man, for all his evident humility and sincerity,

Could not fulfill the law, and could not respond to the call.

His possessions had evidently trapped him, and he went away grieving.

But what comes next is even more unexpected and confronting:

**Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!'**

Have you noticed the body language of *looking* in the text?

We get it three times, and here Jesus is eyeballing his disciples.

And they can't believe he's serious, in fact the text says,

**And the disciples were perplexed at these words.**

But Jesus doesn't soften in the face of their perplexity; he doubles down:

**But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.'**

Now just before today's reading Jesus told his disciples

That the kingdom of God belongs to the little children;

He's calling them to come to him as children

And uses some startling imagery to do it.

Now perhaps you've heard the opinion that the eye of the needle

Is a gate in Jerusalem, and that a camel, to get through,

Needs to lose the goods on its back and go through on its knees.

For what it's worth, I'm wholly unpersuaded by this take on the text

An interpretation that seems to come up very late in the life of the church.

I think we're meant to take the image *literally*,

And to appreciate the *impossibility*: it's not happening. It's *impossible*.

In fact, this approach makes the most sense of the disciples' response: **They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?'**

They are greatly astounded: surely the rich are blessed by God!

Like Abraham, or David, or even Job. Surely they are blessed by God.

*Why else are they rich?* And surely they are more likely to keep the law?

Why would a rich man steal? Or murder?

The rich man even has the breaks put on the temptation to adultery,

Because there'd be so much to lose in a divorce...

And the disciples show their anxiety in the question they ask each other,

If *the rich* can't be saved, then who can? Can *anyone* be saved?

The text goes on: **Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'**

No mere mortal can keep the law well enough

To be part of that community that will inherit life. Not one.

It is *impossible* for human beings. But not for God.

For God *all things* are possible.

Now characteristically Peter speaks up: **Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.'**

Peter *begins* to say this,

But Jesus gently cuts him off, with an assurance and a warning: **Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'**

Yes, in being part of the community of disciples there is a sort on inheritance  
Even in this life, as God's people show hospitality and care for each other -  
Although Jesus does not shy away from mentioning the persecutions that come  
When one lives faithful to his words.

Jesus also assures his disciples that God will indeed give eternal life  
To those who leave what is most precious to them for the sake of the Gospel:  
But note that here Jesus includes not only *possessions*,  
But also important *relationships* as part of what is given up.  
But then Jesus gives a stark warning: **But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.**

In Matthew's Gospel then goes on to give a parable about what he means,  
The parable of the workers in the vineyard,  
Where those who deal with God only according to his justice  
Give him the evil eye because he is good – the same word as in today's text.  
They eyeball God when he chooses to be generous with what is his,  
Even to those who've done nothing to earn what they receive.  
God is not simply *just*, he is *generous*.  
And this brings us to the Good News in today's reading.

There is ultimately only one who left home and father,  
Who endured persecutions, and who died destitute and naked on the cross,  
And that is the good teacher himself, our Lord Jesus Christ.  
He is *the way* to God,  
And in him we see the generosity of God.

He is here for you, trust him.  
Trust that all he has is yours:

That his law keeping is yours,  
That his faithfulness to the Father is yours,  
That his suffering is yours, that his death is yours,  
That his resurrection is yours.  
That his eternal life is yours.  
It is yours, because He is Good; He is generous.  
And he is here to save you.

As long as we trust in ourselves we will live as slaves  
To our possessions, and to death.  
But as we trust that in Jesus we have life,  
We experience the power of the Holy Spirit,  
Who frees us from this slavery,  
And who brings us into the freedom of the children of God.

May God bring us to this faith, and keep us in this faith,  
So that our hope may always be in Jesus,  
And that the generosity of the Father may be seen among us,  
As we are generous with each other, and especially with those in need.  
In Jesus' name. Amen.