

Sunday 17th October 2021

Poverty

Morality, political or godly

Morality is the focus of our gospel reading today. It differs from the statements of our political leaders recently. Their statements were about political morality. Jesus talks to us about Christian morality. He doesn't pull any punches but he does make a joke: camels get through the eye of a needle easier than rich people.

Jesus is to be found quite frequently making jokes. He tells Nicodemus that unless he is born again, he won't get far in God's Kingdom. Looking at the massive temple in Jerusalem he said that if it is torn down, he will build it again in 3 days. These are not side-splitters but they do have a purpose. When he says that camels get through needles easier than the rich, it is not to cause despair or even alarm but it is a challenge. So it was with Nicodemus. If he wanted to follow Jesus into the Kingdom of God, he has to start again, to change course. Not impossible. And we too are rich. We live in one of the most affluent postcodes in the country. Our challenge is one of priorities, of lifestyle. How much of our wealth in terms of finance, leisure or talents are we prepared to hand over for the building of the kingdom? That is not impossible. We are all on the way to getting through that needle's eye.

Challenges

Life is full of huge challenges. Who would have believed that the Oxford vaxxers could produce a vaccine within a year to save the lives of millions? And the Nobel Prize-winners this week who have worked on pain relief? No one could imagine that 10 years ago.

The challenges which face our society today are huge. Who would wish to be Prime Minister to sort out Brexit *and* the Pandemic? One alone would be more than enough for any administration. 'Levelling up' sounds full of gospel justice, but how do we do it? Can we all aspire to be millionaires? That would be a vote-catcher but we all know it won't happen. What is more likely is for a happy medium to be struck and governments use taxes to do that. We know that unpopular message is on its way. But it will require a massive change of heart among most of us if we are not to do it grudgingly. And it is here that the Christian Gospel has much to contribute.

You may think that I have already abused the sermon by straying into political territory but let me re-assure you. It so happens that buried within the Party Conference Season is the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, October 4th. He it was who caught the vision of The Kingdom of God and immediately stripped off his fine clothes – for he was an aristocrat – and wrapped himself in a simple monastic habit. He did this not to spurn riches but to give himself the freedom to re-build the church, to identify more closely with nature and to hug lepers. It was a positive change, an internal compulsion, not one imposed by taxes or hostile forces. This is the saint who most challenges our 21st century lifestyle by preaching the gospel of poverty. It is poverty that re-directs us to God the creator of whom the psalmist sings, *'The Earth is the Lord's and all that therein is'* (Psalm 24). And again *'The Heavens are telling the glory of God'* (Psalm 19). Such prophetic words lay bare our dependence upon God's creation, the structure which any political system takes for granted.

Poverty

Jesus suggests slimming down a bit if we are to get through the eye of the needle. It is a challenge and the disciples are shocked. It must have rocked them as it occurs twice in this short story (Mark 10. 24 & 26). They are shocked but the message went home for we are reading it again today.

St. Francis belonged to the monastic movement and that way of life has always been a challenge to society and The Church since the 4th century with its vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. These are not impossible virtues. I remember quizzing a Franciscan Friar about his wrist watch. Was it his? No, he replied. It belonged to his community. It was an example of a simpler way of living which benefitted more people.

The Monastic movement has spent its life giving up its treasures. Early on it created hotels across Europe and handed them over as businesses. Then there were hospitals, agriculture, schools and more recently hospices. We all benefit from these monastic developments at a time when monasticism has almost disappeared from our culture, certainly in the UK. But the value of poverty still remains and it is this value which is now in the hands of governments to help in the fight against climate change. Using poverty appropriately, we will get through the climate crisis and through the eye of the needle. Amen.