

The camel was the largest animal any of Jesus' hearers would have ever seen. And the eye of a needle was the smallest hole they could imagine. So the idea of a camel trying to climb through the needle's eye was the height of absurdity, and it is more than likely that Jesus was employing a well-developed sense of humour in using this image to make his point. It is like a scene from an animated cartoon and the listeners would have responded it with much laughter. Except the rich man, of course.

Jesus' one-liner was in response to this man's question about how he could inherit eternal life. Jesus replies, 'You know the commandments, so keep them.' He gives him some examples of the big ten: 'you shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; and so on. The man replied, 'I have kept all these since my youth.' He seemed to think of himself as a respectable person, a good Jew, because he had kept the rules. The problem was he was self-satisfied. He was eager to justify that he was OK as far as the faith and the law were concerned.

There is a world of difference between being respectable and being right with God. Jesus' knockout blow comes when he says to the man, 'There is one thing you lack. Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

Jesus certainly did not ask every one of his followers to sell or give up their possessions, including their wealth. For example, we read that some of the women who cared for Jesus and his disciples did so from their apparently considerable resources. Jesus himself often accepted the hospitality of the wealthy and in some of his teachings he commends good business sense. He is not actually condemning wealth as such in this story. But he is highlighting the dangers of the power of wealth and attitudes to wealth, where wealth becomes an obstacle to wholeness, and indeed holiness in life.

Wealth was clearly a stumbling block for this man who approached Jesus. Wealth was his priority. He could not live without it. Worse still, by being wealthy in that land and at that time meant that he was either a collaborator or at least complicit with the occupying Roman power. In fact, in Luke's version of this story, the man is referred to as a rich young ruler, a Jew, therefore, who was doing well under the imperial domination system, unlike 95% of the native

population, the struggling and suffering peasant class. But it is highly likely that when Jesus told him to sell all he had, he was being no more literal than when he said elsewhere, 'If your eye causes you to sin tear it out.' Certainly, Jesus was encouraging him to remove the baggage from his life and do something positively good for his fellow citizens rather than justify himself before God by claiming to be faithful to the literal words of the commandments, which could easily mean he had avoided doing things that were bad or wrong, but without having done much that was good or right.

There is another crucial mistake that the rich man made, and he made it as soon as he opened his mouth. He tried to make an impression on Jesus by calling him 'good.' In the etiquette of the day, such a flattering compliment would normally have elicited an equally flattering reply. But Jesus replies, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.'

We are called in the Christian life to serve without taking the credit or expecting a reward, because the service of God is itself the credit, the reward. This is what Jesus is asking of us as he calls us to follow him. The kingdom of God life which he proclaimed and demonstrated reveals itself most of all when we live for others rather than for ourselves. In this way we become as we are meant to be as human beings: living reflections of God our creator. Perhaps rather pale or dim reflections at first, but by God's grace and our cooperation, reflections that are becoming ever brighter as we journey through this life.

We come to the Eucharist today to give thanks, the very meaning of this worship service. In thanksgiving, we discern and receive the presence of Christ in material forms of bread and wine, which earth has given, and human hands have made. And in our harvest thanksgiving, we recognise that all good gifts that keep us alive and healthy are God given. Our first hymn was a traditional harvest favourite, 'Come ye thankful people come.' But did you notice that only the first verse specifically refers to the harvest of the land, the crops, the fruits of the earth? The rest of the hymn uses the imagery of the harvest but is, in fact, all about us and the way we are called to live. We sang, 'Grant, O harvest Lord that **we**, wholesome grain and pure may be.' Drawing on Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares, the hymn urges us to be 'wheat,' which would mean living thankful, compassionate and generous lives that bear fruit for God and lead us to God's 'garner' of everlasting life.

The Christian life is all-encompassing, because God is all encompassing, present in everything and everywhere. Our worship, our works of service and compassion, our stewardship of the earth and its resources are none other than participation in the creative life and work of God. As we express our gratitude to God today, let us be ever more committed to sharing in the life and love of God, with each of us doing our part to help God transform the world so that everyone can experience life on earth as a true foretaste of the life of heaven.