



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, October 10, 2021
The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Mark 10:17-31
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Belonging and Trust

An angel appears in a cloud of incense to a man and says to him, "Because you have lived a good and virtuous life, I can offer you a gift: you can be the most handsome man in the world, or you can have infinite wisdom, or you can have limitless wealth." Reflecting, the man says, "I'll take the wisdom."

"Wisdom is yours," says the angel, disappearing from sight.

The smoke has barely cleared before the man thinks, "I should have taken the money."

Earlier in the service, the Choir sang this verse from Psalm 90: *"So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom."* (Psalm 90 verse 12)

Today we launch our annual appeal for 2022 while we are still in a pandemic but I am filled with optimism, or should I say, hope, because of the way that parishioners, friends, and supporters responded to our last appeal when the pandemic was truly fearful.

At Saint Thomas Church, we know that we are blessed because of the generosity of the dead – those who have gone before us and have remembered us in their estate plans – but we also need the generosity of the *living* in order to support our mission and to support our Choir School. Put simply, our invested funds are simply not enough to cover what it costs to keep this beautiful church and Choir School open in the middle of Manhattan and so, again, we appeal for your help. And that appeal is to the thousand or so of you who are joining us online today and to those of you who are participating via the on-demand service. We have been surprised, encouraged, and delighted by the generosity of many of you who, during the pandemic, have discovered and chosen Saint Thomas Church to be your place of refuge – your place of prayer and inspiration, albeit in many cases, thousands of miles away. Thank you. Thank you for supporting us and for becoming a committed part of our world-wide family.

Today's Gospel reading could not be a better reflection on why we should give to the Church and to the Choir School for it is not just about money. So, let's look at this passage in which Jesus gives some hard teaching to his disciples and, of course, to you and to me.

First, we notice that the young man is searching for something precious and desirable – eternal life. In the bible, eternal life is not simply about life after death – it is not simply about reversing our mortality. And it is certainly not simply about getting our bodies back after death; after all, would I really want *this* body for

all eternity? (No, I want a better model and one that does not wear out!) In the bible, eternal life is a far richer experience than living for ever - it is about a *quality* of life; about re-imagining the relationships that we have with God, with those around us, and with our planet. We only have to look at the vision of the new heaven and the new earth at the end of the Book of Revelation to understand that. And Jesus, himself, makes this very clear when he prays passionately to his heavenly Father on the night that he was betrayed, *"Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."* (John 17:1b-3)

This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Eternal life is all about *relationships* and the quality of those relationships. So that takes us very neatly back to our Gospel reading and the answer that Jesus gives to the young man's question...

"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; Honor your father and mother.'"

...because those six commandments are all about relationships with others. Yes, inheriting eternal life is not just about the state of my life in relation to God, it is also about how my life impacts on those around me.

At this stage, we hear that the young man has tried to be a faithful Jew, following the Torah to be best of his ability. But I wonder if he was a driven man? Was he concerned only about his relationship with God? Was his keeping of those six commandments superficial in any way? We are told that 'Jesus loved him' and from that love came the advice that perhaps the young man was not expecting to hear: *"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."* The young man whom Jesus loves cannot cope. In fact, we are told that he is shocked and walks away grieving, which we could easily interpret as sulking. As always, Jesus gets to the heart of the problem; the young man is so attached to his wealth that it is also affecting the way he deals with his relationship with God and with others. Notice that when the young man comes to Jesus he says, "What must I do to *inherit* eternal life?" As if it was a commodity to be earned or even a reward for services rendered. As Adam MacDonald, our Director of Development, loves to remind me, *"Giving is not transactional, it is transformational."* No wonder the young man went away with a heavy heart; this was not simply about money, it was also about possessions and relationships. But wait! This is the Middle East in the first Century and we might miss a subtlety in the text if we simply interpret wealth as 'cash.'. Writing recently in a commentary on this passage, Luis Menéndez-Antuña in the School of Theology of Boston University said this: *"It usually goes unnoticed that such a wealthy man would likely be the owner of urban and rural properties. We do not know whether such wealth came from an inherited position or trading goods. However, by all first-century wealth standards, it is most likely that he would own slaves to take care of his properties, manage his household, or perform several tasks in his financial enterprises. Jesus' injunction to sell all of his belongings would consequently include enslaved people. Similarly, Jesus' request to donate the ensuing earnings to the poor would positively impact the lower ranks of the social order where many slaves resided."*

Giving is not transactional, it is transformational. It is as much about our relationships as what we do with our wealth. Jesus said to the man, "Follow me!"

Recently, I was asked to pledge to a charity that I have been supporting. It was a big ask and, as I already tithe to Saint Thomas and support other charities, let alone my family back home, I had to think long and hard. What struck me about the person who asked me was that her commitment to give came from her deep relationship with God and the community she wished to serve. She described her own sacrificial giving as releasing her from attachment to worldly things. Now, to be clear, Jesus is not asking you to be in debt or to give up wealth but he *is* asking you and me to think about our relationship with God, our world, and with

the people around us; he is asking us to discover what is truly valuable in our lives. Or, as the psalmist prays, to **“teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.”**

There is, after all, one certainty about wealth – when we die, we can’t take it with us but we can use it to make a difference while we are alive.

The theme of our Annual Appeal this year is Belonging and Trust; two words that came out powerfully when we surveyed 1200 people a couple of years ago. Belonging matters – and we belong not only to God but to *one another*. When we build up trust in one another, God blesses us with unexpected gifts. And none of this is new: 2 ½ thousand years ago, King David had his own ‘annual appeal’ for funds to endow the first Temple that his son would build and the people responded generously with what are described as ‘freewill offerings.’ (see 1 Chronicles 29:1-22). He raised an extraordinary amount of money, of materials, even precious stones not with a tax (which would be a transactional exchange) but by asking for a gift given back to God freely and generously - a transformative gift because the Temple was not just God’s House but the Nation’s place of prayer. In his prayer to God, David prayed these beautiful words that is the basis of all giving and at the heart of the teaching of Jesus: *“Who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.”* (1 Chronicles 29:14)

All things come from you, and of your own have we given you.

This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Archbishop Rowan Williams, reflecting on that kind of generosity said this “If we have really taken the message in, we shall live lives of selfless generosity, always asking how the gifts given us - material or imaginative or spiritual or whatever - can be shared in a way that brings other people more fully alive. And we shall be able to trust the generosity of others and be free to receive what they have to give us.”

Belonging and Trust. Or, as King David ended his prayer, *“I know, my God, that you search the heart, and take pleasure in uprightness; in the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you.”*

I pray that our Annual Appeal may result in an offering that is freely and joyfully given.