

The Story of the Comfortable Man

An imaginative re-telling of the story in Mark 10:17-22

Sunday 13th October 2024 – St John's and CTK

Mark 10:17-31
Amos 5:6-7, 10-15
Hebrews 4:12-16

*For the word of God in Scripture
For the word of God among us
For the word of God within us
Thanks be to God.*

Do I remember that encounter with Jesus? Well, yes – as if it was yesterday, actually. I've spent a long time pondering what happened that day. Thinking it through. Working out what happened.

I woke up that morning thinking I had everything going for me. I came from a well-known family - my father knew how to manage money and was highly regarded by the religious leaders. My mother was a powerhouse in her own right, and our household was known amongst the local elite for its generous hospitality. We weren't fabulously wealthy, but we were comfortably off. As the only son I had all I could want for, and the expectation of a generous inheritance to come. As we saw it, our respectable way of life had resulted in God blessing us richly.

It was important to me – my religion. I wanted to be right with God. Like all Jewish boys I studied the scriptures, but when my friends started to drop out, I kept going. Partly because I loved the stories; and partly because I wanted to make sure I didn't do anything that would stop God from blessing us and giving us our comfortable life. I saw - you see. I saw the beggars, and the lepers, and the desperate, rough men who gathered in the marketplace looking for a day's work. I saw them, and smelt them, and feared them. Well, not so much feared them as was afraid of becoming like them. And I liked my life just the way it was. I wanted it to stay the same for ever.

I began to study more deeply. My teachers told me about how one day God would act to put right everything that was wrong. There would be freedom for Israel, the wicked would be punished, the good would be rewarded and there would be everlasting life, peace and prosperity.

I guess you could say that I was interested in God for what I could get out of him. And if I'm honest that was about 95% of it.

But somewhere there was a sense that actually I wanted more. I came across a passage from the prophet Amos "Seek the LORD and live." It began to play on my mind.

Not "be religious and live". But "Seek the LORD and live."

And then I heard about Jesus of Nazareth.

In the synagogue. In the marketplace. Everywhere – people were talking about him. Sounded like he was making all sorts of wild claims and the poor and the outcast were flocking to him – as you might expect.

But surprisingly, and less publicly, rumours began to circulate that some of the religious leaders were also going to hear what he had to say. One day my own teacher confided in me that he had been at a dinner with someone who had actually heard Jesus talking about eternal life.

I'm not sure that I really thought through what I was doing. In my head it seemed so simple. I could offer Jesus the use of my status, money, connections – and in return he could give me the 'golden ticket' to eternal life. Win: win.

Yes, I know it sounds pathetically arrogant now – laughable even. But I had no idea of the huge blind spot that my upbringing and my circumstances had given me. No idea that even the limited understanding I had was little more than a massive exercise in missing the point.

I found out that Jesus was staying quite close. I ran all the way for fear of missing him, and arrived just in time. He was about to leave. I threw myself at his feet and blurted out "Good Teacher - what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

I hadn't planned to kneel, but there was something about him that made it seem the natural thing to do...

I *had* planned to call him "Good teacher" – but as soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew that they had not been well chosen. There was something about him that made me wish that I had called him Master. Or even Lord. But by then it was too late.

I suppose anyone other than Jesus would have turned away and left me to my embarrassment. But Jesus just re-directed my mind to God's goodness, and reminded me of the commandments. Well, some of them. The ones that I really do take seriously. About not murdering, or stealing, or lying. About honouring my parents.

Strangely he didn't mention the ones about putting God first, about wanting what other people have, about worshipping things other than God – things like possessions and living comfortably.

Anyway, at least I was able to truthfully say that I kept the commandments that he did refer to.

And that's when he looked at me. Well, when I say looked *at* me, what I really mean is that that he looked *into* me. Looked into the depths of my being, my soul. It was like having a light shone into dark places that I didn't even know existed.

He showed me myself as I really was. Deeply flawed. Deeply lost. Deeply without God in all the places where it matters most.

And yet – deeply, deeply loved.

Then I knew why he'd left out those other commandments - the ones about putting God first, about wanting what other people have, about worshipping things other than God – things like possessions and living comfortably.

His look lasted an instant, but it turned my life upside down. I was shocked by my self-centredness and pride, and grieved by the blindspot which had obscured God from me for so long – putting my trust in my comfortable, respectable lifestyle and possessions rather than in God.

So I knew what he was going to say. An invitation. Two invitations. “Go and get these sorted, then come and follow me.”

It was hard. I'd like to say that I went straight home and sold everything and went on the road with Jesus. But it wouldn't be true.

It took a long, long time to disentangle myself. But I made a start straight away. I stopped wanting stuff just because other people had it. I thought about what I was buying and made sure the money was going to the people who did the work, rather than to the 'middlemen.' I found tasks that needed doing, and employed some of the men standing in the market place so they had an income and some dignity. I gave food and clothes to beggars, and found ways to support the haggard and hollow-eyed women who had no option other than to sell themselves.

And whenever I could, I went to hear Jesus teaching and encouraging all who followed him. I began to see that I could follow him, put him first, live his way from where I was.

Some time later, around Passover, news began to filter through from Jerusalem. Jesus had been arrested. Had been found guilty of indeterminate crimes and crucified - dead and buried. But that wasn't all, some of his friends were saying they had seen him alive! They were claiming that death could not hold him. That Life itself is to be found in him.

I hurried up to the city – arrived just in time for Pentecost. Heard Peter preaching. It all fell into place, and I knew beyond doubt that the day I had met Jesus I had looked into the very eyes of God.

I'm no longer owned by my possessions, but instead I belong to God. It feels like a rebirth, a new life. “Life in abundance,” Jesus calls it. A life connected to God's eternal life and love that will never end.