

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time – October 10th 2021
A Reflection by Fr Sylvester O’Flynn OFM Cap., Rochestown, Cork

The Rich Young Man

Jesus was setting out on a journey, a road that would ultimately lead him to Calvary as the suffering, serving Messiah. Are his followers prepared to overcome self-centred ways to follow him? Today’s Second Reading tells us that the word of God is alive and active, as sharp as a sword, like the surgeon’s scalpel able to reveal secret emotions and thoughts (Hebrews 4:12). It certainly touched a sore point in the inner life of a rich young man who ran up to Jesus, knelt before him and asked him, “Good master, what good deed must I do to possess eternal life?” He was a good man who observed the commandments.

The key word to this man’s mentality is possess ... to possess eternal life. He was a very wealthy man. Possessions were important to him. Eternal life would be the ultimate possession. In his life everything had a price. He speculated that the price for eternal life must be some good deed. “What must I do?” Jesus challenged his bondage to possessions. “Go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven: and then come, follow me.” At this, the young man turned away. He went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth. His problem was that he did not own his possessions but his possessions owned him.

Jesus was poor

Saint Paul reflected on the poverty of Jesus Christ. “Jesus Christ, although he was rich became poor for your sake, so that you should become rich through his poverty” (2 Cor. 8:9). Jesus was poor in his simple lifestyle, his dependence on others, in the poverty of undergoing an unjust trial, and finally the poverty of death. All the popes of the past century have stressed the obligation of sharing with the poor. Pope Francis came to Rome from familiarity with the shanty regions of Buenos Aires. He wrote of his ideal Church. “I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. They have a deep sense of faith. In their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to be evangelized by the poor and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.” (*Pope Francis: The Joy of the Gospel, 198*).

The rich young man of the gospel walked away from that challenge. There is a very misleading version of Christianity, sometimes called Cadillac Christianity or Prosperity Gospel, which claims that success and wealth are a sign of God’s blessing. What about people who have nothing but bad luck, loss of their business, illness in the family? Prosperity Gospel’s answer is that there must be a curse on these people because of sins, maybe in past generations of the family tree. What would Jesus say?

Put yourself into the story

One way of meditating on the gospel is to use your imagination to put yourself into a scene in the gospel and then let the incident cast light on your feelings and inner life. Mark is particularly helpful for this meditation. His gospel has a powerful sense of close bodily contact. Crowds press around, Jesus heals people by reaching out, touching, and laying hands. Remember how he caressed the little children. Today’s story highlights three looks of Jesus. Firstly, he looked at rich young man with love. Secondly, he looked around at his disciples. His third look is gazing at the disciples.

A look of invitation

Jesus looked steadily at the young man and loved him. It is a look of warmth and invitation. He is inviting the rich young man to break the chains that hold him in thrall to his possessions. Is he ready to change his set of values, let go of his possessions, give his money to the poor and follow the example of Jesus? “But his face fell at these words and he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.” What a contrast between the loving look of Jesus and the sad face of the young man. It’s as if his face was just a plastic mask that melted before the fire.

Jesus looked round on his disciples.

This is the second look of Jesus. He is the teacher who makes eye contact with his pupils to get their attention before speaking to them. “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” To enter the kingdom means to live by the teaching and ideals of Jesus. Really, for me to enter the kingdom I must let the kingdom enter me. This involves a lifelong effort to live according to the ideals of Christ. Not easy going.

He gazed at them

The apostles realised that this would be a very difficult ideal. They asked, “Who can be saved?” Then, we are told, Jesus gazed at them. Gazing is a look of wonder. It is a way of looking into the distance and seeing a bigger picture. The bigger picture here is the mercy of God which is greater than our failings. “For men it is impossible, but not for God: because everything is possible for God.” Then, to reassure the apostles, he said that those who faithfully follow him, maybe through persecutions, will be rewarded a hundred times over in eternal life. Everything is possible for God.

Prayer

O Jesus, allow me to sit with you and feel the warmth of your love for me. May I sense your loving eyes inviting me to be one of your followers.

O Jesus, my teacher, help me to pay attention to your teaching. Strengthen me so that I may not be afraid of your lofty ideals. May your grace sustain me when I am tempted to drift from your way.

O Jesus, my Saviour. May I be filled with hope when I reflect on the promise you made of rewarding our efforts a hundredfold.