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Self-donation (Mark 10: 17-31)

Pentecost XXI

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This is one of those gospel stories pretty much guaranteed to generate a reaction. I think it's instructive to notice what it is for each of us.

Some who hear this story find themselves immediately convicted by it, and just do what they hear Jesus telling the rich man to do. That's how it was for the young St Antony, the founding father of desert monasticism. In the year 269, when he was 18 or 19 years old, Antony heard this passage read at the Eucharist in his rural Egyptian church. He promptly distributed the inheritance he'd just received and began to lead a life of prayer and poverty. It was much the same for St Francis of Assisi and the early Anabaptists, as well as for some who've ended up on the mission field today.

There are other hearers of this story who react strongly against it. They think it sounds just plain irresponsible. After all, if everyone did this, how would stable farming practice and civic life, care for the elderly and the young be sustained? How would art be created, education funded and churches maintained? Jesus himself accepted the hospitality of those who owned property, and any society requires that some capital accumulate. To pretend otherwise, so this line of thought goes, is a kind of dishonest hyper-spiritualism, a luxury that those of us in the 'real' world can't afford.

And then there are others (I tend to be in this category) who just find ourselves squirming uneasily in our seats. It's a story that ranks right up there with the one about the poor widow donating her last two coins to Temple offertory. I know I could afford to give away more money than I do. I know I'm at the wealthier end of the spectrum,

certainly in global terms. So when I hear Jesus telling this nice and sincerely devout man to sell all he owns and give the proceeds to the poor, I feel uneasy. How much is enough to give away?

Well – maybe you recognise yourself in one of these reactions ... maybe at different times in life you've been in different places with this story. However it is for you, I think it's vital that we recognise what's most deeply at stake in Jesus' response to this man. Because only then will we be in a position to discern what his words imply for us.

So let's turn back to the text and the urgency of the rich man's approach, as he runs up and kneels before Jesus. This is quite a gesture of humility, quite a significant honouring of the itinerant rabbi by a man of substance. And yet his question jars a bit. 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' It's an interesting way of putting it, don't you think?: the assumption that you can '*inherit* eternal life'. It's a bit merchant banker-esque. Is he (perhaps without being fully aware of it) relating to God like he relates to everything else? As something he *can* earn or own, another possession?

Jesus doesn't respond very warmly at first. 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone'. And he goes on, '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; Honour your father and mother"'. Jesus seems to be heading off any sense that there might be secret knowledge on offer here, some refined, insider-trading technique for getting more of God. He reiterates the accepted and publically available wisdom of his tradition.

But then the man says to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these commands since my youth'. And it's at this point, it seems, that his real longing and personal vulnerability begins to show. Law abidingness, he's saying, hasn't led me to intimacy with God; I'm

still hungry for something, wanting something deeper. In the gospel of Matthew (19: 20-22) this rich man is also described as a 'young' man, and now Jesus is touched. He responds to this glimpse of vulnerability, this exposure of the rich man's deeper yearning: 'looking at him, [he] loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me"'. But this, the rich man, did not expect to hear. And when he heard it, 'he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions'.

Why does Jesus make it so hard for him? Why does he hit him with such a massive upfront fee? One lens through which we can perceive Jesus' words here is the notion of divine testing. On this view, God is a God who asks, quite unreasonably and arbitrarily, that you do what you least want to do. But if you do it because God asks then God will ultimately reward you with 'treasure' in heaven. You will have proved yourself 'deserving'. It's like the dare you have to accept if you want to belong to 'cool' group in the playground. Later in the passage, it sounds a bit like Peter is operating with this kind of vision. 'Look, we have left everything and followed you' (subtext, how good are we? how much do we deserve?). Well, it's a possible interpretation of the passage – but I must say, I don't like the 'feel' of it. It seems to make God a pretty manipulative character. And I note that although Jesus doesn't directly refute what Peter says, his response is ambiguous. After all, he mentions 'persecutions' as part of the 'reward' those who've given up everything will reap – what a bargain!

But if Jesus' instruction to the rich man to give up all his possessions is not a 'dare', not an arbitrary divine 'test' by means of which he must 'prove' his commitment, then what is it about? I think it's to do with the necessity for a decisive shift in the source of our identity and security, if we're serious about the deeper journey. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein offered an image I find really helpful in this regard. He once described holding fast to faith as an experience of no longer supporting yourself on

this earth but suspending yourself from heaven. 'It is true', Wittgenstein says, 'that someone who is suspended looks like someone who is standing but the interplay of forces within him is nevertheless a quite different one & hence he is able to do quite different things than one who stands'.

it feels to me as though Jesus is inviting the rich man to shift his whole centre of gravity. He's being called from self-sufficiency (standing on his own feet) into a dynamic of radical trust ('suspension'). He's asked to consent at the level of his whole existence to being absolutely dependent on God. This isn't about how much money he's willing to give away to prove his commitment; it's about how much of himself he's willing to give over so as to know himself held. And it's not that God will reward him with eternal life only if he gives up his possessions; it's that he's blocked from *receiving* fullness of life as long as he's sourcing his life apart from God, in what he owns and earns.

So what does this mean for us? I've spoken of the necessity of a 'decisive shift' in the source of our identity and security, if we're serious about the deeper journey. Mostly this shift involves a process. There can be particular moments, turning points in our lives – some of you will remember a time when you did say, consciously, 'yes'; there was a moment when you truly gave yourself to the way and felt differently ever after. For others, there's been no *one* moment – just a gradual realisation that somehow, maybe pretty inchoately, you're on the way, and that you can't, you won't turn back. But most of us vacillate at least to some degree between self-sufficiency and self-entrusting, between 'standing' and allowing ourselves to be 'suspended', our whole weight resting on the grace of God.

And this brings us to an important point. When the rich man goes sadly away, Jesus says to his disciples 'how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God!' But riches aren't the only 'possessions' in which we put our trust. We also (many of us) have investments in power, control and prestige. We're pretty

attached to being liked and being right, and some gain considerable pay-off from being victims of circumstance. None of us gives up these 'possessions' in a single dramatic gesture, for they possess us at very deep levels. No matter how decisively we've sought to give ourselves to God, there's always more we can give over. Self-donation is not a once and for all event, but a practice of becoming aware and then letting go what's blocking my reception of life, what's tripping me up – here and now, today.

And here's the thing. Although giving up these kinds of possession is an inward process of dis-identification and detachment, this inward movement must be incarnate if it's to be fully realised. We can't just 'think' it; it must be enacted in how we live. So that means Christian discipleship does involve coming to sit more lightly to our money; we're not all called to sell everything we own – but we do need to lessen our attachment. It's the same for our investments in control and reputation, in our plans for our own future.

This is a story guaranteed to evoke a reaction even as it offers an invitation. Maybe it's because it asks us to confront where our life is actually most deeply found. And I wonder, which of our possessions, what sources of security might each of us more fully let go, so that we may more freely receive what Jesus, looking at us and loving us, longs for us to have?