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### **The Hidden Life of Nazareth (Mark 10. 17-31)**

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‘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’ (10.21). On a first reading of this passage, set for today, I found myself alienated and annoyed. It seems to commend a muscular expression of faith that may (at least in principle) be available to a rich and healthy young man with no dependents to speak of, but is utterly beyond anyone caring for young children or elderly parents, anyone holding down a responsible job or rendered vulnerable by illness, disability, trauma. As if heaven’s treasure is accessible only to those who can afford to give up a life of luxury, and is a luxury denied those who don’t even have time to ask about it because they’re too busy just hanging in, just muddling through as best they can amidst the responsibilities and commitments that constitute their lives.

As you know, here in Canberra we continue our Covid-lockdown. Restrictions are beginning to ease, as they are elsewhere around this country and the world, but for many in our community there’s still much to contend with. You’ll know as many difficult stories as I – families, especially single-parent households, pushed to their limit by the demands of home-schooling and working from home, or else trying to manage on inadequate government support and no work. Neighbours of ours are first-time parents, often separated from their premature baby by limits on hospital visiting; there are those in our own community who have been unable to attend the funeral of a beloved parent, the wedding of a beloved daughter and others whose relationships are under strain. There are pockets of public housing in full quarantine; those living alone suffering loneliness and deteriorating mental health; young adults whose studies and lives are on hold, even as the prospects of securing affordable housing recede exponentially. And for all of us, there’s the underlying tension of

things amiss in the wide world – an indefiniteness about present and future, a sense of dis-ease, anxiety, as if there could be worse to come.

Amidst all this malaise, the gospel confronts us with what looks like an exhortation to yet more insecurity and provisionality. This reading presents a call to be radically dispossessed of home, income and family ties that most of us have no intention of obeying and no conviction that we ought to. Where, then, is the help in this? How is this a word for us?

Well, I described it as a ‘muscular’ expression of faith. It sounds a bit as though only those who are willing radically to switch lives will really find their way to God. There is something in this, but as I reflect, I think what’s being asked here is actually subtler – less muscular – than it first appears. And if that’s so, I wonder if the invitation for us is to discover how Jesus’ teaching here may be realised not apart from, but precisely *within* the form, within the strictures, of the lives we’re already leading. I want to explore this possibility by drawing a little on the story of Charles de Foucauld.

This may seem a strange choice. After all, Charles de Foucauld is almost a paradigm of the ‘rich man’, the ‘rich young ruler’ of this gospel story. He was born in 1858 into an aristocratic French family whose motto, amazingly, was ‘Never to yield’.<sup>1</sup> He inherited a large fortune, became an officer (supposedly ill-disciplined and dissolute) in the French army and subsequently an explorer in north Africa – publishing an important account of Morocco recognised by the French Geographic Society. According to his online biographies, he was impressed by the faith and prayer life of the Muslims he encountered on his travels, and this started him on his own quest for God. In 1886, at the age of 28, he was converted and, as he wrote subsequently, ‘As soon as I believed that there was a God, I understood that I could not do otherwise than to live only for Him’.<sup>2</sup> In 1890, he entered monastic life – joining the Trappists in France and subsequently a much poorer monastery in Syria.

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<sup>1</sup> From the website of the North American Jesus Caritas Communities, <http://www.brothercharles.org/literature/charles-de-foucauld-life-and-message/>

<sup>2</sup> August 14, 1901, <http://www.brothercharles.org/literature/charles-de-foucauld-life-and-message/>

Charles de Foucauld, a rich young man without dependents, seems to have done exactly what Jesus says is necessary for coming to God – he sold all his possessions, cut his family ties and entered vowed religious life. So how is his story helpful for us?

Well, it's to do with what happened next. One day, de Foucauld was sent to watch by the corpse of a poor Arab, and in that household he saw the dead man's widow and children exposed to a life of much deeper poverty and risk than his own. This led him into a spiritual crisis and a passion truly to share as Jesus had shared in the real vulnerability of the human condition; a yearning for radical solidarity with the majority of people, with 'every mother of a family' and 'every person working hard in a bustling city to earn his living'.<sup>3</sup> He wrote: 'I no longer want a monastery which is too secure. I want a small monastery, like the house of a poor workman who is not sure if tomorrow he will find work and bread, who with all his being shares the suffering of the world. Oh, Jesus, a monastery like your house at Nazareth, in which to live hidden as you did when you came among us'.<sup>4</sup>

And this notion of Nazareth as the place of Jesus' hidden presence in the world came to be key for de Foucauld's spirituality. In part, this is about poverty – Nazareth represents Jesus' willingness to occupy the lowest place, 'the place of the poor, the unknown, of those who didn't count, of the mass of workers'.<sup>5</sup> And it also represents ordinariness: de Foucauld wrote, 'the Holy One of God realised his sanctity not in an extraordinary life, but one impregnated with ordinary things: work, family and social life, obscure human activities, simple things shared by all people'.<sup>6</sup>

And here's what seems suggestive to me. A rich, young Charles de Foucauld left his prior life to seek out 'Nazareth' in the form of the poor Arab communities to which he was drawn. He left behind wealth and privilege so as to live with the mass of people, earning his wages in secular work, being in the world 'anonymously' (if you like) for the love of God. But not everyone needs to leave where they are, in

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<sup>3</sup> Carlo Carretto, *Letters from the Desert*, trans. Rose Mary Hancock (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972, 1990), p.70.

<sup>4</sup> Carretto, *Letters from the Desert*, p.71.

<sup>5</sup> Carretto, *Letters from the Desert*, p.93.

<sup>6</sup> Carretto, *Letters from the Desert*, p.93.

order to find 'Nazareth' – most of us are already there. And if that's so, then Jesus' call to follow him unconditionally might be heard, not primarily as a command to rush off into a different life, but to allow the life we're already living to be permeated by him, to become an expression of God's presence and love hidden in the very midst of things.

After his death in 1916, de Foucauld left behind a small religious order, the Little Brothers and Little Sisters of Jesus who live anonymously in towns and cities around the world. One of these Little Brothers, Carlo Carretto, wrote that Jesus of Nazareth taught us to live every hour of every day seeking the will of God. 'And for this', Carretto says, 'one does not have to shut oneself in a monastery or fix strange and inhumane regimes for one's life. It is enough to accept the realities of life. Work is one of these realities; motherhood, the rearing of children, family life with all its obligations are others'.<sup>7</sup> Discipleship is simply approaching these everyday things in the spirit of Jesus.

I said this gospel reading involves a call to 'switch' lives – but perhaps now we might see that a little differently. Most of us will not be sent into the remoter regions of the earth, leaving behind our jobs, homes, families; nor is this kind of external change a precondition for coming home to God. The switch in question is subtler: it's the switch from self-sufficiency to radical responsiveness, from a half-hearted to whole-hearted incarnation of love. From the outside, it may look as though not much has changed – we do our chores like everyone else, we get stuck in traffic, and along with the great mass of humanity – Christian and not – we do our best to care for our families and ease our neighbour's burdens. This is the humility of Nazareth, and yet, says Carretto: 'The same actions, if carried out under God's light', radically transform the life of persons, families, society. Nazareth is the 'sanctity of common things'.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus said: 'many who are first will be last, and the last will be first'. In his poem, 'Start Close In', David Whyte put it this way:

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<sup>7</sup> Carretto, *Letters from the Desert*, pp.94-95.

<sup>8</sup> Carretto, *Letters from the Desert*, p.95.

*Start close in,  
don't take the second step  
or the third,  
start with the first  
thing  
close in,  
the step  
you don't want to take ...*

*Start right now  
take a small step  
you can call your own  
don't follow  
someone else's  
heroics, be humble  
and focused,  
start close in,  
don't mistake  
that other  
for your own.*

Perhaps, then, it's by really inhabiting the lives we have, really seeking to heed Jesus' voice and follow his way in the midst of them, that we will discover ourselves growing in that quality of love which is 'treasure in heaven' and the salvation of the world.