

October 10, 2021

Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!

In the fascinating encounter between Jesus and a rich man, in today's Gospel, the two seem to disagree about how to reach the goal. But about the goal itself, they are on the same page.

The rich man's opening question for Jesus is, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And in his answer, Jesus tells him, how to "enter the kingdom of God." There may be some semantic differences in these two phrases, but for practical purposes they are about the same: inheriting eternal life and entering the Kingdom of God sound pretty much identical. Jesus and the rich man are both interested in the same thing, and both have thought about it a lot. They are on the same page as pertains to the goal.

Before we go on to consider their differences though, maybe it's worth a moment to tip our caps to that rich man, and to Jesus, for how much this goal matters to them. They really care about ultimate meaning and destiny for humans. Good for them. Speaking for myself, I can go weeks on end and never once think about my eternal destiny. There are plenty of things to worry about in this life. Musing about eternity and the Kingdom can seem pretty remote. My plate is already full.

But that rich man and Jesus got it right, I have to admit. This life with all its concerns is indeed transitory. A blink of the eye, and suddenly eternity is all you have left to work with. So maybe I should move eternal life up on my list of concerns, and put the Kingdom of God a little higher on my to-do list. A point to bear in mind, as we turn to the question of how to obtain that goal.

At first, it looks like the rich man and Jesus might agree about the method also. Jesus at first implies that inheriting eternal life is not so hard: just obey the 10 commandments. "You know the commandments," he says: "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." Etc.

So it came as a shock to that rich man to hear Jesus go on to add that, actually, keeping the 10 Commandments does not suffice. More is needed. "You lack one thing," Jesus says. "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Jesus said, "You lack one thing." So what is that one thing lacking? Jesus' explanation of what that one thing is, actually mentions two things. A: give all your wealth to the poor; B: follow me. It's just like Jesus to say there is one thing lacking, and then tell us two things. He's always trying to keep us on our toes—but what I would suggest is that

when he talks about the one thing lacking, the missing piece he really cares about is “follow me.”

*Follow me.* That’s the important piece. You could sell all your stuff and give everything to the poor, but if you don’t then move on to a heartfelt personal following of the Incarnate Word of God, you did it for nothing. Getting rid of his possessions, would just be clearing the deck for that rich man. It would have been just preparatory, a pre-requisite for the real work, which is, to “follow Jesus.”

All right then, let’s think about this. What would have happened if a person had literally followed Jesus around? What would they have gotten from that experience? What would they have seen and heard, spending time with him, going where he goes and watching what he does? Well, let me give you a short list of the kind of thing they would have seen and heard.

Our story today is from chapter 10 of Mark’s Gospel. Let’s go back just a little and remind ourselves what Jesus had been up to, what a follower of his would have been seeing and hearing recently, in previous chapters, say chapters 6-9.

They would have seen Jesus blessing children, and heard him say, “To such as these the kingdom of God belongs.”

They would have watched as he healed a boy who was continually convulsed by a spirit—perhaps what we would call today epileptic seizures. But the boy was cured.

They would have seen Jesus cure a blind man at Bethsaida, and restore his sight.

They would have seen him feed 4000 people, starting with seven loaves of bread, and a few fish.

They would have seen him cure a deaf man in the region of the Decapolis.

They would have seen him cast out a demon from a girl in the region of Tyre.

They would have seen him heal throngs of people in Galilee, walk on the water, and feed 5000 on a hillside.

All these events are recorded in the preceding four chapters of Mark, chapters 6 through 9. Actually, I’ve left out a few dramatic events. But you can see them for yourself, they are all there.

The cumulative impression of all these events, one after another, must have been pretty intense. Anyone who had literally followed Jesus around and seen this sort of thing happening would, as we used to say, have had their minds blown. Surely their hearts would have been opened too.

These events are what Jesus has in mind when he talks about the Kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not where you go when you die. The Kingdom is what God is doing here and now, through the active presence of the Incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ our Lord.

What God was doing then and there, through Christ, was healing, teaching, forgiving, loving, feeding, nurturing. These activities of God give a good working definition of what Jesus meant when he talked about the Kingdom of God, or as we might better translate it, the rule of God. When God takes charge, when God rules, stuff happens. Good stuff.

When Jesus told the rich man to follow him then, Jesus was inviting him to come along and experience those amazing activities himself. Had he done so, very soon that man would have learned that he didn't actually need all his wealth anyway. In the Kingdom of God, there is plenty to go around. Gold can't buy what God is giving away for free. And that's just the beginning. That rich man would have had a whole new understanding of what it means, to "inherit eternal life," or to "enter the Kingdom of God." He would have experienced in person what Jesus meant by saying that for God, nothing is impossible.

What a shame he walked away from it. If he had accepted Jesus' offer to become his follower, we might actually still know his name. He might have become an Apostle! As it is, he's just another generic rich person who missed the boat, and faded into oblivion.

But let's fast forward to our times. What are we supposed to get from all this? Let me be succinct.

Do we have to sell all our possessions to follow Jesus? No, not necessarily. Maybe you or I have different issues that make us keep missing the boat with Jesus. Maybe it's not money with us; maybe it's food or drink or pride-- whatever. What matters is to get past whatever it is, and then follow him, to see what he is up to here and now.

How do we get to see all the cool stuff of the Kingdom that I was just describing? Well, follow Jesus is all the direction we have to go on. Where is God at work right now? I've seen it happening in places like Haiti and Brazil for sure. I don't mean miracles, just ordinary loving, feeding, nurturing, and so forth. Of course, those are miracles in their own way, but certainly they are going on in Dillon too. I don't know this town well enough yet to know exactly where but I'm sure you could fill me in.

Is it only outside of church that the Kingdom occurs? I may have left that impression, sorry, I got carried away. No, it happens in here too. This is definitely Kingdom terrain as well. We hear the Word of life and receive the bread of life. Kneeling before the Cross, we feel its assurance that Christ is with us whatever befalls. The Kingdom surely does happen in here too. Just keep looking for it everywhere, in here and out there; that's my advice. Just keep on following Jesus: that's how you and I will inherit eternal life.