

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time B - Oh God, then who can be saved? , Proper 23
October 10, 2021.

Happy Thanksgiving weekend to all my Canadian Brothers and Sisters. "Harvest is plenty but labourer is few" (Matthew 9:37). While we are with gratefulness for Thanksgiving dinners and warm homes, we pray that the hungry will be fed and the homeless will be given warm shelter.

Many of us use the exclamation "**Oh God**" (Oh Lord) to express surprise, shock, or worry. **Few weeks ago, I received an email from a friend in Hong Kong saying that Kenneth passed away. My immediate reaction was "Oh, God".** Kenneth is a dear friend, my classmate for 18 years, from kindergarten to elementary school to high school to university in the same faculty of engineering. He had Parkinson's for the past two years and also had a mild stroke. Recently he became immobile and had difficulty in speaking and eating, spending considerable time in hospital. He was planning to check out of Hospital soon but his condition deteriorated badly. Being on a Sunday, his wife and two children were able to rush to the hospital and said goodbye to him. **He passed away peacefully. May almighty God have mercy on Kenneth, bring him to everlasting life and welcome him into the light of your face, Amen.**

Jesus, as always, challenges his followers and us to think "outside the box." Don't we often listen to the Gospel stories, hear what Jesus is calling us to do with our lives, and say to ourselves, "**Oh, God**"? **This Sunday's Gospel (Mark 10:17-30) is certainly an "Oh, God" Gospel, because Jesus is turning his followers' lives upside down.** He gets their attention by talking about something very precious: possessions. It's an uncomfortable Gospel at first glance. A man kneels before Jesus and asks how to inherit eternal life. He seems sincere, and when Jesus talks to him about keeping the Commandments, he says he has kept them since his youth. What more could Jesus want from him? He tells the man to sell his things, give the money to the poor, and then follow him. As sincere as he is, though, the man goes away sad, because he has a lot of possessions. It seems he can't give them up.

Possessions are a primary temptation that comes with wealth. If we've got it, a lot of times we have a tendency to show off. "I want it. I have the money; I'll buy it." As prosperity grows, our decisions about using money move slowly from an emphasis on needs to wants. **We have it not because we need it, but because we want it.** Throughout his ministry it becomes abundantly clear that **Jesus hopes our want will be to satisfy the needs of others.** In the third parable in Matthew 25, Jesus makes it clear that those who have been attentive to the needs of others around them, those who have offered food for the hungry, drink to the thirsty, visited the sick and those in prison, are the ones who will enter the kingdom of heaven. To care for these ones in need is to care for Jesus himself. **Those who are not willing to use their own possessions to meet the needs of others cannot expect eternal life.**

Considering how harshly Jesus talks about the rich, it is reasonable to ask how Jesus feels about them. "**Does this mean that Jesus hates rich people?**" Thankfully, Mark provides a clear answer when he tells us in verse 21, "**Jesus, looking at him, loved him,**" and then goes on to instruct the young man to sell his possessions, give to the poor, and come and follow him. Jesus' reply is deeply rooted not in envy, distrust or any desire to put down one whose position of privilege came from worldly wealth. It comes from the kind of love that would yearn for this man to know his true worth without the possessions, the ways in which God's love wants to provide for him in ways he can never provide for himself, to know the confidence that he is indeed one of God's beloved and to live in that light. As we watch the young man walk away,

we recall how Jesus applauds the widow who gives only two small coins. In Mark 12 we read: **“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she, out of her poverty, has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”** Ironically, the widow has done what the rich young man could not. Is it easier not to possess many things then?

Consider this lesson on how to trap a monkey. The story goes that African hunters wanting to capture monkeys unharmed would use as a trap a bottle with a long narrow neck just large enough so a monkey could put its hand in it. In the evening the bottle would be tied to a tree, and in the bottom of the bottle they would place several good-smelling nuts. In the morning they would find a monkey with its hand clutching the nuts, held securely in the bottle. At any time, the monkey could have freed itself simply by opening its hand to let go of the nuts.

“You can’t take it with you,” is a common folk wisdom. It usually means that when we die, we have to leave all of our possessions behind, so we might as well enjoy them now. What Jesus seems to be saying to us is that not only can we not take possessions with us beyond the grave, but clinging to them, like the monkey to its nuts, holds us captives. There will be places we cannot go, experiences we cannot have, and insights that will never illuminate our lives if we let our possessions possess us. This does not mean that prosperity should not be seen as coming from God. Being rich and having lots of money may not be our problem but we are all invited to answer God’s call, **“Come follow me”**. **Jesus is asking us, “Am I worth following?” He wants us not just to admire his way of life but to live it fully and not as part-time followers.** Discipleship is costly and following Jesus makes very stark demands on our lifestyle. Too often, however, we fail to recognize that every Godly gift carries with it God’s hope for how it might be used. Joy for us is when we align our use of the gifts God gives with what we discern to be God’s hope. Our rich young man is a monkey who cannot let go, free himself of the bottle, and enter into an earthly adventure that will carry him surely to the kingdom of heaven.

So, if we take this “Oh, God” Gospel seriously, it just might really turn our lives upside down. Yes, Jesus is calling us to get rid of the stumbling-blocks in our lives. He lets us know that it’s not easy to get rid of those stumbling-blocks, and that deciding to try sometimes leads to the Cross, but he also lets us know that if we do, he promises a reward many times greater than what we’ve been clinging to. We have a choice. We can walk away shocked and grieving like the man in today’s Gospel, or we can get on with the work of really living as God’s people. It’s our choice. **In reflecting on today’s reading, three questions come to mind: What are the gifts God has given us? What is God’s hope for their use? Are we able to let go of whatever it is that keeps us from following Jesus? Lord, we recognize that all the favours we have received today come from your generosity, do not let them return to you empty, but let them bear fruit, Amen.**