

Reflection for the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Why is Jesus so down on the rich? Sometimes, Scripture criticises the rich because their riches have been accumulated through injustice. They've become rich by withholding the wages of their workers or some such. But Jesus isn't, it seems, making that in today's gospel. Some people become rich without injustice or dishonesty. Jesus is saying, rather, that there's something about being rich in general that makes for trouble.

Our Lord doesn't directly tell us here what the problem is; the context in which he says these things though, sheds some light. The rich young man is asking Jesus about what he needs to do to attain eternal life- eternal life with God. He is talking about the most precious and valuable goal anyone could ever have. And yet, when Jesus tells him that he should sell all he has and give to the poor in return for treasure in heaven, the man goes away sad. His wealth, it turns out, is more important to him even than life with God.

Riches are a particularly dangerous distraction, because they can insulate us from a fact that is obvious to the poor: life is precarious, and ultimately, we rest in the hands of God. Without God's help, we can do nothing. If you have money, it is all too easy to pretend to yourself that you are in control of your life. Many situations which are a set-back to the rich are an absolute disaster for the poor, since they have nothing material to fall back on. They can only rely on God.

We may find ourselves hearing this story and feeling all smug and superior. "That rich young man," we want to say, "What a fool! Doesn't he see that treasure in heaven is better than earthly wealth?" The disciples, who so often misunderstand Jesus, on this occasion are one jump ahead of us. Notice, they don't reply, "How can the rich be saved?" Instead, they say, "*Who can be saved?*"

What they see, and we're tempted to miss, is that rich people have their distractions, but all of us have our own, whether rich or poor. There will be something for all of us that will be difficult to give up or part with, and perhaps it's that thing that stands in the way of us gaining the treasures of heaven. Naturally distractions and comforts remind us that we are in control and it can seem an impossible task to part with them. That is why Jesus' reply is so comforting. "*For people it is impossible, but not for God. For everything is possible for God.*" We rely on the power of God, and what we cannot do, he will do by his power, only then will we have treasure in heaven.