

Trinity 19 2021

Amos 5:6-7

Hebrews 4:12-end

Mark 10:17-31

Father Christopher

The gospel we have just heard may seem a strange one to have for a baptism: the rich young man, who finds it so hard to give up his possessions, seems so far from William, the baby whom I am shortly to have the great privilege of baptising.

And yet this passage follows on immediately from the passage in which Jesus holds a child and says that we are to become as one of these to enter the kingdom of heaven.

In comparing the two episodes, it seems to me that we are given a picture of how, as we grow older, we tend to build up a carapace, a shell, to protect us from the world. We build things up around us to give us security and protection, and many of us also build up a slight front – an invulnerable version of ourselves which we present to the world.

Well, it should come as no surprise to you that I am going to tell you that God sees through that. We try to make ourselves independent – independent of one another, but, in doing so, of God as well. And as we build up our confident exterior, we become less and less open to our brothers and sisters, and less and less open to God.

We all know the films which are based on this premise, largely showing crusty old men, not *always* played by Anthony Hopkins, who have become set in their ways, but are transformed by the love of a good woman – and it is normally a woman, who helps them to open up and deal with their vulnerabilities and pain.

They are perhaps a caricature, and yet there is at least something of that in most of us.

I don't actually think this passage is saying that everyone should sell all that they own and give the money to the poor.

I think that what is going on is that Jesus is looking intently at this man: a book I read last week described how Jesus's eyes must have burrowed into his soul, such is the attention which He gives him, as we are told, *'Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.'*

Incidentally, this is the only time in the gospel that we hear Jesus described directly as loving someone. But in loving, and looking at, our young man, Jesus sees that it is his possessions that are keeping him from being truly open to and dependent on God.

We will all have something that gets in the way, and for many of us it might well be our possessions.

I sympathise with that. From receiving what seemed a very strong sense of calling to the priesthood during the Eucharist one Sunday morning, in 2007 I think (watch out, it could happen to you too!), it took me another eight years to get to the point of leaving my job and starting to train for it.

And two of those years were spent paralysed by worry about giving up my house, which I loved, because I thought I would no longer be able to afford the mortgage.

So, I didn't move forward in becoming the person I felt God was calling me to be, because I was so attached to my possessions, and this one possession in particular. Such foolishness!

And of course, once I had done it, I wondered why it had taken me so long.

Once I let go, opened my hands as Mother Emma put it the other week, all was fine – what had been holding me back for so long, evaporated as being of no importance in comparison.

But the things we build up around us, to give us security, can all too easily and all too often end up protecting us from the grace of God, as well as from poverty, or whatever else we think we are guarding against.

And my identity was all rather tied up with earning a certain amount, and the status of my job and that kind of thing, rather than trusting that other people, and God, loved me for who I was beneath all of that. Yet this kind of vicious investment of trust in things, in money, can only ever be related to the kind of anxiety which is the opposite of trust in God.

Hence it being as difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven as for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

Not impossible, for with God all things are possible; but for it to be possible, we must somehow not be attached to our money, to our things.

God loves and nurtures us as we are.

And there is no small irony in the fact that the wiser we seem to get in human terms, and the cleverer, and the more senior in whatever we do, often the further we get from the image of trust and vulnerability that is in fact closest to God.

And a large part of being a Christian, it seems to me, is to keep inviting God to to strip away those layers and that shell that we find it so hard to stop building up, again and again.

And that will no doubt be part of young William's Christian journey.

And as William becomes the world's newest Christian shortly, he will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to help him with that, and to keep renewing in him the image of God's glory in which he was created, and for which he is destined.

And in his childlike trust, as well as being the newest member of our community, he is also our model, our leader and our guide, as we all seek to break out of those human barriers we all too easily shelter behind, and instead place all our trust in God, and in His Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen