



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 6th February 2005
by Mark Ashton

10p

Mark chapter 10:13 – 31

Is Sincere Enough?

I'm going to try to keep things simple today. So often when clergy get up to speak about the Christian faith, we just confuse people. One Anglican Missionary, preaching through an interpreter in India, began his sermon by saying, "The beatific familiarity of this theologically intriguing passage, set in our beloved lectionary for the Sunday of "Quinquagesima, should not blind us to its dominical profundity." There was a pause while the poor interpreter scratched his head. Then he said in Hindi: "So far, our speaker has not said anything worthwhile at all. When he does, I'll let you know."

Well, we've got a simple title, "Is Sincere Enough?" and our reading from Mark's Gospel was quite straightforward. In the Bible we have only 4 major sermons of Jesus recorded, but around 28 meetings between Jesus and individuals. And this rich man is the only person of whom it is said that he went away from such a meeting sad. We hear of many who went away puzzled, some went away furious, but only this man sad. Many came to Jesus sad, but only this one left Him sad. Which is all the more surprising, since he came with such a good question on his lips: "*Good teacher,*" he asked, "*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" (v 17b). Surely it was (1) The Right Question? This man was wealthy. But he realised that there was more to life than material possessions. He had already got the good life; but he was asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Now, we live in an age far more comfortable in material terms than his. We take for granted things he would never have dreamt of. Science has given us an unprecedented understanding of, and control over, our environment. As children we used to sing, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are..." But no longer; now it would have to be

'Twinkle, twinkle, giant star,
We know exactly what you are:
An incandescent ball of gas,
Condensing to a solid mass.

Twinkle, twinkle, giant star,
We need not wonder who you are;
For seen by spectroscopic ken,
You're Helium and Hydrogen.'

But with all the knowledge and control it has brought us, science has not provided us with meaning. One man, Aldous Huxley, who was no Christian, wrote: 'Reality as actually experienced contains love, beauty, mystical ecstasy, intimations of Godhead. Science did not, and still does not, possess intellectual instruments with which to deal with these aspects of reality.' Indeed, they are aspects of reality that we all find elusive. Bernard Levin, who was one of my favourite newspaper columnists, once wrote:

'To put it bluntly, have I time to discover why I was born before I die? I've not managed to answer that question yet, and however many years I have before me, they are certainly not as many as there are behind me. So there is an obvious danger in leaving it too late. Why do I have to know why I was born? Because, of course, I am unable to believe that it was an accident. And if it wasn't one, it must have a meaning.'

We would all like to find meaning and purpose, to have some grasp on eternity, before we die. But the issues seem so hard to understand. We just can't make sense of them. Each time we consider them, they seem a little more confusing, so we put them back in the 'Pending' tray, don't we?—where they gather dust; and we get them out less and less

frequently as we get older. Is that true of you? But we know they are important: why was I born? Is there a God? Is there meaning to life? What must I do to inherit eternal life?

It was the right question—but, you know, it was also (2) The Wrong Question. Notice Jesus' abrupt answer: **“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No-one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honour your father and mother.’” (vv 18-19)**. Jesus had just made the point that you have to receive the kingdom of God like a child receives a gift, if you want to enter it: **“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (vv 14b-15)**. Now this adult man runs up and asks what he must do to enter it, completely missing the point Jesus has made. So Jesus tried a different tack, and showed the man that no one can do enough good things, because no one is good—except God alone. But still the man misses the point: **“Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy” (v 20)**.

And Jesus loved him, not, I think, for earnestness, his sincerity or because he was lovable. He may have been sincere, but he was also self-righteous and spiritually obtuse/wrongheaded. No, Jesus did not love him because this man was lovable. Jesus loved this man because Jesus was Jesus. Jesus is like that: He loves the unlovable: **Jesus looked at him and loved him (v 21a)**.

And so to make the point in a way the man could not miss, Jesus put His finger on the one aspect of his life that would reveal it to him: **“One thing you lack,” he said, “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. The come, follow me.” At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth (vv 21b-22)**. The man was very sad because his world had been turned upside down. We must remember two things about this incident. First, the ancient world did not revere children in the way we do. We look up to childhood, but they looked down upon it. So to learn from children how to enter the kingdom of Heaven was topsy-turvy. It was the wrong way round, a reversal of proper values. Second, for them riches were a sign of God’s blessing. We tend to think of riches as tainted: “filthy lucre,” we say. If anyone is very wealthy, we always assume they’ve cut a few corners, pulled a few fast ones, given and received a few backhanders along the way. Wealth, for us, is morally suspect. But for the ancient world, riches were the palpable sign of God’s blessing. So for this man to give all his wealth away was to give away the very evidence of God’s blessing upon him. So how could it be a route to God’s blessing? It would turn everything upside down. We never like to have things reversed like that.

When I was a small boy, I remember how much I enjoyed it when an adult picked me up, turned me upside down and swung me around by the heels. Do you remember that? But, you know, as I have got older, I find I have lost my taste for it. In fact, if one of you were to do that to me as we leave church this morning, I don’t think I would thank you! Nor, as we get older, do we find it any easier to have our ideas turned upside down. But that is what Jesus does. He did it to this man, as he showed him there was nothing he could do to inherit eternal life: neither with his good deeds nor with his wealth. It was a dead end. And He does the same to you and me. Are you prepared for that? I’ve illustrated it sometimes like this: we think God is asking us to fly (Fig. 1) and we try and we try and we try (Fig. 2). But we’ve got it all wrong. So let’s end with the bad news and the good news. First:



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 2a

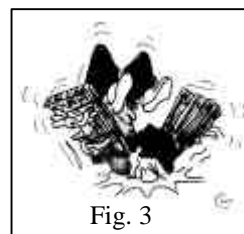


Fig. 3

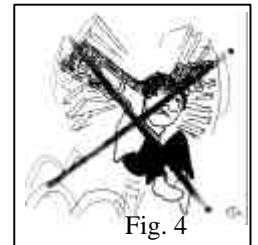
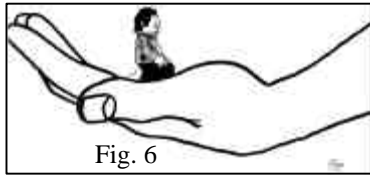


Fig. 4

(3) The Bad News: which is that there is nothing that I can do to inherit eternal life (Fig. 2a). That is why it was the wrong question. In terms of the cartoon, it is not possible to fly (Fig. 3). The trouble is many of us never acknowledge that. We keep on trying (Fig. 4). Doing our best, being decent, trying our hardest. Perhaps, as we get older we flap a little less fast, but we’re still hoping to get there in the end, and it gets ever harder to acknowledge we are wrong. But we know we don’t have eternal life, that there is no reality in our relationship with God, that He just isn’t real to us. I remember the intensity of my realisation that though I was religious, and upright, and morally earnest, and had given a year to work in the Third World, and was English and middle class, I did not actually know God. I was cut off from Him and I couldn’t get back to Him.

But with that bad news, there is also:

(4) The Good News: *The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God”* (vv 26-27). What I can't do, God has done. I cannot possibly keep His standards. I cannot even manage to be the sort of person I would like to be, let alone the sort of person God would want me to be. And I cannot atone for all that I have done wrong—against other people, against myself and against God: in ignoring Him and pretending He does not exist; and living my life as if I ruled.



But what I cannot do, God has done. The question in verse 17: *“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* is answered in verse 27: *“With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”* He paid the price for my sin, so I can be free of all guilt, even through the death of Jesus on the cross. And He has reached down to take you and me back

to Himself. (Fig. 5 & Fig. 6) Have you let God do that for you? Will you let God do that for you? That's the point about children: they're happy to receive things, to have things done for them; when we proud adults do not value things unless we pay for them. Well, the most valuable thing of all we cannot pay for; we can only receive it as a gift.

The beginning of verse 21 is lovely, isn't it? *Jesus looked at him and loved him.* Despite this man's spiritual blindness and his self-righteousness, Jesus loved him. It was not deserved love. And He loves you too, however little you deserve it, however far you are from Him at the moment. We can't earn love, can we? One older man was known to be courting a widow, and he announced to his friends one day that they'd got engaged. “How did you propose to her?” they asked. “Well, I did not actually have to propose to her,” he said, “because I asked her last year if she would marry me and she said she would never marry a man unless he could save at least £1,000 in a year. Well, this year she asked me how much I'd saved, and I said, “£26”. She said, “Well, that's near enough.” We can't earn love. It has to be freely received. So, if you don't know God's love, it's not because you haven't earned it; it is because you won't accept it. It isn't because you haven't yet done something. It's because you haven't received something.

I am going to end by explaining how you can accept it, right here and now, if it is right for you, by a simple prayer—a prayer I prayed for the first time 37 years ago tomorrow night, February 7th 1968: the day I received God's love and became a Christian.

There are three parts to the prayer:

- (1) I had to admit that I was not already a Christian, that I was actually cut off from God, and that it was my own fault. I was responsible for the sin that cut me off from Him. And I would never come to know Him until I admitted that I did not know Him, and that it was my fault I didn't know Him.
 - (2) I had to trust that God dealt with my sin, that Jesus had paid the price for it on the cross; and that all my fault and guilt was dealt with there.
 - (3) I had to ask Jesus to send His spirit into my heart, to take charge of my life—take control, rule over and bring me back into a living relationship with God.
- (1) I am sorry that I am a sinner.
 - (2) Thank you for dying for me.
 - (3) Please come into my life as my Saviour and Lord.

That is what I am going to pray now. Perhaps you have been thinking these things over for some time. Today is the day to act.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)