

If you were listening carefully this morning, this passage we heard proclaimed no doubt sounded strangely familiar.

The story of the Rich Young Ruler taken from the 18th. chapter of St. Luke's Gospel, starts out almost identically to the story of the Good Samaritan which we encountered a few weeks and a few chapters ago:

In both cases, our Lord was approached by men who intruded into His life like reporters after a courtroom verdict. Both men wanted to ask Him a question. Their questions were not just similar, they were identical – word for word. “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

The word order in this question is important. Literally, it would come out something like: “By doing what will I inherit eternal life? (RHG)

That sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it? (When two opposite concepts find themselves appearing together in the same sentence. Like: “The silence was deafening”. “I would like to get the Jumbo Shrimp!”).

An “inheritance” is unearned. Something we receive from a family member or friend who has both the means and the willingness to bestow a gift. That gift may consist of money, real estate, stocks, bonds, etc. The very word itself signifies the

bestowal of something upon another person who has done little if anything to earn it.

“What must I do?” On the other hand, goes the opposite direction. If it is up to me to do something, it is not a gift but a payment in kind. I need to . . . work a 40 hour shift, make a wise investment of my own funds, sell something I own in order to buy something I want more. “What must I do?” suggests action, not passivity. It means “I’m here, I’ve got my gloves. Where do I start?”

Different Paths

Although the two men’s questions were the same, the similarities ended there. In the case of the lawyer, we see no real desire on his part to engage with what our Lord was saying. Remember, this took place before someone came up with the adage: “Be sure mind is engaged before shifting to mouth!” Instead of considering what he was being told, the lawyer was thinking only about his rebuttal, a face saving comeback that would dazzle the surrounding crowd. (This is an especially bad choice when you are standing before the Lord of Glory, the “Pantocrator” Who “will judge the secrets of all men” as Saint Paul writes in Romans 2:16)

Not so with the rich young ruler. He doesn’t seem to be at all concerned about what the crowd around him might be thinking. In fact, if we compare all three accounts of this story – in Matthew,

Mark, and Luke, we find just the opposite. Although he was both “rich” and a “ruler” (of the synagogue) he came running out to meet Jesus on that day. Not “walking” or “ambling” or “sauntering”. No, he was like Zachaeus, the wee little man who climbed up into a tree to get a better look at Jesus. “Laugh all you want – just get out of my way!” When the rich young ruler caught up to Him, he knelt at His feet in the presence of all, staring up at Him from the dusty road leading to Jerusalem. This entire dialogue took place from that humble position.

The lawyer called out to Christ as “Teacher”. This was a mere formality, like calling a judge “Your honor” even when you have no respect for him or her. It is just “what you do” – a matter of propriety. But the rich young ruler broke ranks when he called the Lord “**Good** Teacher”. This was highly unusual. Every pious Jew would call a respected Rabbi “teacher” But we do not hear of anyone calling their Rabbi “*Good* Teacher”. It is almost as if this wealthy young man really meant it. And as a matter of fact, I think he did!

Our Lord’s response to this sobriquet has generated no small amount of debate over the centuries. He said to the rich young ruler “**Why do you call me good? No one is good but God.**” Those who would deny the divinity of Christ have twisted this passage to mean that Christ was separating Himself from God –

that somehow He didn't claim to be either "God" or "Good." Thank God for heretics! Every time they come up with this kind of nonsense, it brings out the best as the true "Doctors" – Theologians of the Faith boldly declare the True Faith!

He wasn't saying "No one is good but God – not even me!" Saint Cyril speaks for the united church when he writes: *"The Father is good. The Son is good. The Holy Spirit is good. Still, there are not three goods but one good. . . ."* *"The Lord feared that the one who in addressing [him as] "good master" might understand him as only a man. He therefore did not say, 'No one is good except the Father alone.' He rather said, 'No one is good except the one God.' By the name Father, the Father makes himself known. The name God includes himself, as well as the Son and the Holy Spirit, because the Trinity is one God. [On the Trinity]*

It Isn't Working!

Whereas the lawyer a few weeks ago started talking as soon as he had the opportunity, the rich young man listened carefully to every word spoken by our Lord. Of course it is possible to read this story from several different perspectives. The rich young ruler doesn't always fare so well in the eyes of the church fathers. But since Saint John Chrysostom weighs in on this issue, and since he

is my “go to” guy when it comes to interpretation, I am going to follow his lead this morning. More on that in a moment!

In answering the question, our loving Lord gently prompted the young ruler towards the response He was looking for: “You know the commandments” Do not commit adultery. Do not kill. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Honor your father and mother.”

These, by the way, come from the second part of the Ten Commandments – those commandments which deal with our responsibilities towards others . . . “and your neighbor as yourself”. If something (like money, for instance!) comes between us and our neighbor, it is in reality an idol which comes before God Himself.

The response of the rich ruler? “All these I have observed from my youth!” Again, some early commentators look upon this response as being either haughty or argumentative. As if he were saying “I’m already doing those things perfectly.” “I’m an expert”.

I hear a very different voice, and perceive a very different heart in this man. Here he is kneeling before a rabbi on a dusty road in front of a crowd of gawking onlookers. He pleads for advice and counsel, and responds as plainly and openly as he knows how. I can almost hear his plaintive voice: “I’ve tried! It isn’t working!”

This is not an argument. It is a confession This is a soul crying out – a wounded heart that knows it is lacking something crucial, (but what?) and that all the “good things” done in life, all the personal effort and the keeping of the rules have not been sufficient.

Tough Love

And now our Lord speaks those familiar words which from the outside seem to be so very harsh: “You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.”

All three of the Gospel writers tell us what our Lord said to this young man. Only Saint Mark tells us WHY He said it. Saint Mark prefaces this remark with the words: “Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him.”

And here is where I will bring in the voice of Saint John Chrysostom - the “Golden Mouthed.”

“Some indeed accuse this young man, as an ill-minded hypocrite, coming to tempt Jesus. I would not deny that he is fond of money, and under subjection to his wealth, since Christ in fact convicted him of being such a character. But I would by no means call him a hypocrite. Why? Partly because it is not proper to make judgments about things which are uncertain. But even more, because St. Mark has removed all doubt; for in his account he tells

us that . . . ‘Jesus beheld him, and loved him.’” (Homily on Matthew 19 lightly paraphrased).

It was BECAUSE our Lord loved this young man that he spoke these harsh words. Had He not loved him, He would have remained silent, leaving him to wallow in his godly insecurities. True love is tough love.

The Lord’s words struck at the point of this young man’s greatest vulnerability (OSB). Here was the “one thing lacking” in his pursuit of eternal life. His money stood before him as an impenetrable barrier. It was like the camel which could never be threaded through the needle’s eye.

And what was his response? Unlike the lawyer, the Rich Young Ruler was listening to our Lord’s answer, so much so that the surrounding crowd of people, and the humiliation and scorn he faced kneeling on a dusty road towards Jerusalem did not distract him. The answer came through loud and clear. “Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Come, follow Me.”

For perhaps one of the few times in his life, he found himself wanting something that was too rich for his pocket book. Eternity stood before him, and that which his heart desired was placed on the scales. On the other side, his wealth, his power, his earthly

comfort cried out for him to run away. His moment of decision had come.

Conclusion

“But when the man heard this he became sad, for he was very rich.” Saint Mark adds: “His countenance fell at the saying and he went away sorrowful for he was one who had great possessions.” What a tragic sight!

I always wonder. Did those words of Christ continue to burn into the heart of the rich young man, far beyond that eventful day? Did he, like Saul of Tarsus find himself “Kicking against the goads” over and over again as he considered the poverty of his riches and the wealth of eternal life in God? At last, did he heed those difficult but life saving words, distribute all that he had to the poor and follow Christ? We are not told in the Scriptures, and to my knowledge, Church history is silent regarding his fate.

A respected Anglican commentator from the 19th. Century speaks for many – certainly for me – when he dares to at least hope that this young man did indeed have a change of heart. In his book *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* the brilliant Jewish convert to Christianity, Alfred Edersheim had this to say:

“What he lacked—was earth’s poverty and heaven’s riches; a heart fully set on following Christ; and this could only come to him through willing surrender of all. Although we hear no more of him,

who that day went back to his rich home very poor . . . we cannot but believe that he, whom Jesus loved, yet [one day] found in the poverty of earth . . .the treasure of heaven.”

Impossible! You say?

The disciples probably thought so when they asked: “Who then can be saved?”. Perhaps even as He answered their question, our Lord was looking at the sight of a sorrowful young man who was walking away with his head down and shoulders slumped.

Loving him, and all of us who have fallen into the trap of placing riches first and God second. To all He spoke those blessed words in the presence of His disciples:

“The things that are impossible with men are possible with God.”