

## **Mark 10 Rich young man**

St Anthony the Great lived for the best part of a hundred years from the middle of the third century. The Life of St Anthony, attributed another giant, St Athanasius, was written a few decades after his death. In it, we read of Anthony's decision to take this morning's gospel – in fact, its equivalent in St Matthew – rather literally. His parents had both died, and he was left a rich man, about eighteen or twenty, to care for himself and his younger sister. In church, he heard the words of Jesus to the rich young man, and went out to dispose of most of his material assets, keeping only a few over for his sister. On returning, he heard the text, Take no care for the morrow – and responded by going back and selling even those few things which remained. It is one of the great stories of Christian heroism, though we might note that the reaction of his sister – who was deprived of all her family wealth and placed in a convent – is not recorded.

Anthony became a hermit, living a solitary life in the Egyptian desert, remaining remote from the wider world, battling temptations in his struggle to live in intimacy with God. Eventually his reputation for holiness attracted enough followers to have formed a small community which lived in the valley beneath his mountain cave. One can visit that same monastery today, and indeed climb to St Anthony's cave. I have done so, and for a comfortable middle class Oxford student it was quite an introduction to the ascetic life. There were nine of us, and for lunch

we were presented with nine empty bowls and one large pot of cold beans. For dinner we received the same. Breakfast was different – we were given a small amount of honey, which we were expected to put on our beans.

It is important to stress that the ascetic life, as practised by Anthony and the other remarkable people we call the Desert Fathers, is not a rejection of the physical world. Anti-materialism is a doctrine against which Christianity has battled from its inception. The doctrine of the incarnation is a reaffirmation of the Biblical doctrine of creation, in that it reminds us that what God has made is very good. The term askesis, from which we take the word “ascetic”, really means exercise, an act of striving to improve. The askesis of the desert fathers and later of various forms of the monastic life represent possible ways of striving for intimacy with God, but they are not the only ways.

The rich young man in the gospel is told to do something extraordinary. Go and sell all that you have and give to the poor. First of all, we should notice that this command is given to him specifically. The written law has been rehearsed, and by this test he should be passed with flying colours – all these I have kept from my youth. His question – what must I do to inherit eternal life – is something persistent, it is not satisfied by the traditional answer Jesus gives – you know the commandments, keep them. The young man wants some further test or measurement. Thus he

is given an injunction for his particular case – go and sell all that you have. There is deliberate hyperbole at work here. The demands of the kingdom cannot be met by ticking boxes – there is no manageable set of tasks which we can control and overcome in order to inherit eternal life. Thus it is that Jesus demands of him that which he knows the young man is not able to give. In that sense, the need to give up possessions is for this young man something properly ascetic – it is his exercise, his task of striving. Christian asceticism does not have a single, achievable, practical goal, but rather is a way of life, a continuous exercise for which the grace of God, the initiative of the Spirit, is always a prerequisite.

The second thing to notice about the rich young man is that Jesus does not tell him to destroy his material wealth. He tells him to give it to those who are in need of it, the poor. There are two different needs at work here, the material need of those who are genuinely deprived of the necessities of physical life; and the spiritual need of the rich young man himself. Jesus tells him that there is one thing he lacks, not that he has one thing too many. He needs to be free of that which for him has become a barrier to following Jesus on the path of the kingdom.

This reading of the story is not meant to offer comfort. Jesus turns from the young man to his disciples, and consequently to you and to me, when he says How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. Not, notice, how hard for the rich. Just how hard. It is hard for everybody. In the particular

case of the rich, what is going on is something as daft, something as topsy-turvy, as a camel going through the eye of a needle. And if anyone has ever told you that the eye of the needle refers to a gate through which the camels of merchants would pass, do not believe them. That idea was invented in the Middle Ages to make us all feel better.

If we don't feel better, however, what are we to do? What is our ascetic life, our exercise in seeking better to live the life of the kingdom? Partly, it is the continual need to recognise God as God, to acknowledge the goodness of the material world and also its dependence – including our own – upon the creator. When the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is reminding his readers of the power of the Word of God, he goes out of his way to say that it penetrates to the division between soul and spirit, and joints and marrow – the word of God reaches to the heart of the inner person, both spiritual and physical, the one is not set in opposition to the other, rather the mention of both pairs emphasises the completeness of the word's power.

The material world, good as it is, is not ours, it belongs to God. Where material things are needful, they should be provided. Painful as it may be, each of us should try to enter into that gospel story and ask what task, what exercise, Jesus would set each of us. He would almost certainly invite most of us to consider whether we can properly call ourselves generous, whether we prioritise the things of God when we decide what

to do with our means. It is a genuine coincidence that this gospel reading, and hence this sermon, come in the week before our annual Gift Day, but that doesn't alter the church's material need. It would be very English, in fact very Oxford, for me not to say anything about how much the parish needs your money, but the fact is, it does, and if we want this church to carry on growing, to carry on praying, to carry on singing, to carry on standing, we simply have to ask ourselves some hard financial questions.

But those questions, important as they are, are just some of the possible exercises in which our asceticism might consist. Our first task is to explore, in scripture, in prayer, in worship, in self-examination, what these exercises mean for us, for you and for me. The rewards of the kingdom are clear, in Jesus's words, but the people to whom those rewards were promised are those who went on to lives of persecution, imprisonment and death. This gospel is not meant to make us feel better, it is meant to challenge us, and to make us leave, like St Anthony, with the words of Jesus ringing in our ears. If we choose to ignore them, we are truly deaf to the word of God himself.