

Mark 10:13-31 – Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ

Introduction

In 1678, John Bunyan, that great puritan preacher and evangelist wrote his tract, *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ*. I believe that this sums up the passage from Mark that we have read this morning and that it forms an appropriate title for my message.

Mark 10:13-31 tells how two different people, or sets of people, came seeking something from Jesus. The first were parents bringing their children to Jesus that he might bless them. The second, rather longer passage, tells of a rich young ruler who came to Jesus with an important question. Let's look at each of these incidents in turn and draw out from them some lessons for ourselves.

Little children brought to Jesus

We are told that "people were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them." The "people" concerned are not identified but we can hazard a guess that they were the parents of grandparents of these children.

Jesus was popular with the common people, even though his teaching was sometimes difficult for them to understand. The crowds were always flocking around Jesus, anxious to listen to his teaching and eager to see if anyone would be healed. They recognised that there was something different about this man – he taught as one who had authority, not like their usual religious teachers. They recognised that this was a man who had been sent by God and who spoke for God, yet one who had time and compassion for them.

Many must have come along with their little children and grandchildren since they could not have been left to fend for themselves. And as those with children began to speak to one another they said, "Let's get him to lay his hands on our children bless them." So they brought them to Christ.

As was so often the case, the disciples tried to protect Jesus. They rebuked the parents and tried to have the children sent away. In effect they were saying "Give the Master a rest. He has far more important things to do than to bless little children."

We read in verse 14, "When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these'."

What did Jesus mean by these words?

Jesus' words have nothing to do with infant baptism! That's not the issue here. Jesus is angry with his disciples because the message they are conveying through their words and actions is a denial of the truth. Jesus has time for these little children and is always ready to bless them. They have nothing to bring to him in return. They have no status that entitles them to make demands on Jesus. They are the most lowly and insignificant people in their society. They are glad to come to Jesus without any agenda.

This is the meaning of Jesus' words: "The kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." This is the only way that any may come to him. As one commentator has written, "To receive the kingdom as a little child is to allow oneself to be given it, because one knows one cannot obtain it as a right or attempt to earn it" (Cranfield).

I love the words with which this passage concludes, "[Jesus] took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them." The parents or grandparents who had brought their little

children would have treasured that moment. Jesus not only placed a hand on their little one, he took the child in his arms. And the children themselves would have treasured that moment for they would not have been allowed to forget it: "Do you know, when I was very young and quite small, Jesus took me in his arms and blessed me!"

We also must surely treasure this picture of the Lord Jesus. In Isaiah 40 we have a wonderful picture of the day when God will come to rescue his people from their captivity, and we read:

See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm...
He tends his flock like a shepherd:
he gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young. (Isaiah 40:10-11)

This description of God as Saviour of his people is perfectly fulfilled in Jesus the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd of the sheep. Here we see his tender compassion and concern for those without status or power.

What do we learn from these verses?

1. We are reminded that *all* are welcome to come to Christ, young as well as old, poor as well as rich, those whom the world venerates and those whom the world despises. All may come and are welcome to, and will be welcomed by, Jesus Christ.

And we are warned that we must never do anything to discourage others from coming to Christ or to put stumbling blocks in their way. This is not the only time that Jesus expresses his disapproval and anger over those who would keep people from him.

We need to pray for governments and authorities who seek to discourage or persecute Christians and to pray for Christians living in societies where it is forbidden to tell others of the Saviour – forbidden to urge others to come to Jesus Christ. Pray for a change of heart for such governments.

But we also need to take Jesus' words and his anger seriously. Are we ever guilty of discouraging others from coming to Christ?

2. We learn how *we* must come to Christ. I cannot express it better than to quote from two of our hymns:

Just as I am, without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bidd'st me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Or again:

Nothing in my hands I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress,
Helpless, look to Thee for grace

We always have to come to Christ like these little children. Coming as we are with no pretensions. He will bless us – and he will not leave us as we are, he will transform us.

The Rich Young Ruler comes to Jesus with a question

The second incident in these verses concerns a rich young ruler who comes to Jesus with a question – Mark tells us that the man had great wealth (Mark 10:22), Matthew that he was a young man (Matthew 19:20), and Luke that he was a ruler (Luke 18:18).

The man fell on his knees before Jesus, evidently keen to show great respect for Jesus, and he asks his question, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus first challenges the young man's description of him as "good", saying, "No one is good – except God alone." These may seem strange words. Is Jesus denying that he is good? I don't believe that is the case. But Jesus may have detected in the man kneeling before him and addressing him in this way a form of flattery. The man is seeking to win a favour from Jesus. By his words, Jesus wants to turn the man's attention for a moment away from him and to God. He wants him to think of the nature and character of God, of what it means that God is good, absolutely good, and what this means for his demands upon our lives – that we should be good.

But to Jesus' words, "You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honour your father and mother.'", the young man immediately responds, "Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy."

This young man seems to have a woefully inadequate view of God and of himself. The reminder of the character of God and his demands on our lives should have humbled this young man and brought him to realise the great gulf between God and himself and his own best efforts. It should have brought him to realise that he can only come to God like a little child with nothing to plead except God's mercy and blessing. But it is clear that, far from humbling him, the young man is filled with pride at his own achievements, "I've kept all these since I was a toddler"! As one commentator remarks, "The man's naïve reply makes it clear that he has not understood the commandments nor can ever really have taken them seriously" (Cranfield).

But Jesus does not react to this young man with anger, but with compassion. I find the next words in this passage deeply moving, "Jesus looked at him and loved him" (v. 21a). They remind me of Jesus words concerning the great city of Jerusalem, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing" (Matthew 23:37). We see in these words concerning this young man, Jesus' longing that people might return to God; he loves them and yearns for them.

But Jesus also sees right into this young man's heart. He sees that there is something in his life that is keeping him from coming to God. Jesus says to him, "One thing you lack; go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (v. 21b). The young man had come asking Jesus about eternal life but at Jesus' words his face fell and he sadly turned away. His wealth was far more precious to him than following Jesus.

The passage we are looking at this morning is a living illustration of the truth Jesus proclaims in verse 31: "many who are first will be last, and the last first". The rich young ruler turns sadly away while little children are embraced and blessed by Jesus.

Riches and the Kingdom

The young man had come to Jesus asking he could inherit eternal life. It's all too easy for us to read this as, "How can I make sure I get to heaven when I die?" And then Jesus' answer to this young man seems a little strange. Why does Jesus not talk about himself and tell the young the

young man why he is making his way to Jerusalem? Why does he not speak about the cross that lies before him and the need for this young man to put his faith in him?

I want to say something this morning that you may find shocking, but I ask you to hear me out. The Gospel message, the good news that Jesus proclaimed and that he wanted people to hear was not about how to get to heaven when you die. Jesus came proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. He was proclaiming that God was now acting to put a broken and rebellious world to rights – and was acting through Jesus himself. The kingdom of heaven is invading our world and turning it upside down – or perhaps we should say, turning it the right-way up. There is blessing for the poor and the oppressed, those who are humble and who mourn, but the proud are sent away empty handed. This is the message that Jesus is proclaiming and he calls this young man to let go of his riches, use them to the blessing of others and to come and follow him. But he sadly turns away.

Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (vv. 24b-25).

The disciples are astonished and wonder then how anyone can be saved. How can anyone enter into this kingdom which Christ is proclaiming? How can anyone possess the life that is eternal – have life now in all its abundance and a life that shall never end? It's quite impossible for anyone to gain that life for themselves, but God is able to give that life to anyone. As Jesus told Nicodemus, another ruler among his people, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" (John 3:3). It has to be an act of God, and it needs to begin here, by following Jesus in the path that leads to life.

Peter, speaking up for the disciples, tells Jesus, "We have left everything to follow you!" (v.28). Yes, they have followed Jesus and will continue to follow him, cost what it may – though not without faltering on the way. Jesus tells them that they have sacrificed nothing, for in him and in the family of his kingdom they have homes and brothers and sisters without number – though with persecutions – "and in the age to come eternal life" (vv.29-30).

How do Jesus' words address us?

1. Jesus' words remind us that eternal life is not first and foremost about ensuring that we have a place in heaven when we die; it is about knowing and following Jesus. Jesus calls us to be part of his kingdom movement, the invasion of earth with the transforming life of heaven. Following Jesus brings a multitude of blessings now but it also requires sacrifice. We are called to follow Christ in the way of the cross. He calls us to live a life markedly different from the values of this present age. Following him demands living for others and holding nothing back. It's a life made possible only by the power of God's Spirit within us.

2. Jesus' words remind us that the shared life of his people can act as a powerful witness in the face of a self-centred and self-satisfied world. Christians love for one another and care for one another is – or should be – a powerful demonstration of the life of God's kingdom; a witness of what the world should be like. When governments will not give the promised 0.7% of UK's riches to help those in desperate need overseas – when they insist that we must put ourselves first – Christians should show that we live by a different Spirit – a better spirit than the 'me-first' spirit of our age.

I fear for the outcome of the present COP 26 conference starting tomorrow in Glasgow. I fear that little will be achieved as each country seeks to protect its own interests rather than seeking the blessing and wellbeing of God's world.

3. Jesus challenges us concerning our conversations with others. He challenges us to listen to the questions that others are asking and calls us to see behind their questions to what is in their hearts. He challenges us not to respond with a gospel formula but to ask relevant questions and to speak to people's hearts and needs. Above all, he calls us to love those to whom we speak, even if, in the end, they turn away from Christ. He calls us to echo the call of dear John Bunyan, "Come and welcome to Jesus Christ."

Do not lose heart, God is able to touch and transform the hardest human heart, "all things are possible with God."

4. Finally: Jesus is continually calling *us* to come and follow him. Are there things in our own lives which we are holding onto and which are barriers to wholehearted devotion to Christ and to the life of his kingdom? Ask God to help you by his Spirit to deal with them:

The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from thy throne,
And worship only thee. William Cowper

Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Listen to his call. Do not turn away sadly from him as did the rich young ruler, but, like the faltering disciples, keep on following him, keep on living for him, keep on showing the world the reality of heaven's life come to earth. Pray for those whose lives we touch and for the opportunity to encourage them to come and follow Christ in the fellowship of his kingdom people.

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Marshfield, 31/10/2021