

WEEK 4: MONDAY

At the time I am writing this, a politician has just received loud and long applause for saying rude words about the very rich, especially people in the banks who pay themselves vast sums of money. Everybody likes to hate the rich. That's the popular mood right now.

That's why the most surprising thing about this story is — how surprised the disciples were when Jesus declared it would be hard for the rich to enter God's kingdom (verse 24). You might have thought that would be obvious, not least to some- one who had been listening to Jesus and following him for some time. But it seems as though the disciples still looked at the world through the lens which said that the more rich you were, the more God was pleased with you. Some passages in scripture do seem to point that way. But mostly this was an assumption people made, a way of coming to terms with the obvious inequalities in society.

(Let's be clear, by the way. When the rich man speaks of 'having eternal life', and when Jesus speaks of 'entering the kingdom of heaven', or 'having treasure in heaven', they are not talking about 'life after death' in the popular, modern sense. They are talking about the whole new world that they believed God was going to make, 'the renewal of all things' (verse 28). The point is that they believed that 'heaven' was going to rule on earth, so that the question was about who would inherit and share in that new heaven-and-earth world.)

Jesus had seen, in this case and no doubt many others, that earthly riches form a lining of lead around the heart. They insulate you from God and from other people. They drag you down to be less and less the person you might have become. Here was this man, all eager and willing — except for the one thing that mattered.

Jesus' initial reply is also quite surprising. He lists the commandments, but not all of them: murder, adultery, theft, lying, honouring father and mother, and (an ancient summary of the whole law which Jesus had made his own) loving your neighbour as yourself. What about the earlier commandments, the ones about not having or making any other gods but Israel's God, the one about honouring his name, and the command about the Sabbath? Wouldn't we have expected Jesus to include those too?

Well, there is a sense in which he does. When the man tells him he has observed all those commandments, Jesus gives him two more: sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and come and follow me. In the place where we might have expected Jesus to speak about putting God first, getting rid of idols, and honouring God's name, we have the command to get rid of money and to follow Jesus. This makes us realize that when Jesus challenged the man at the beginning ('Why ask me about what's good? There is only one who is good') there may have been more to the quip than meets the eye. Putting Jesus first and putting God first seem to be coming close to the same thing.

That's why we can never remain content with shallow discussions about the goodies and baddies in today's culture. Yes, some people play fast and loose with other people's money and get fat on the proceeds. But plenty in the same profession work tirelessly for their customers and give away much of their own income. Yes, many people in the western world today have made greed a way of life. But many work responsibly within the system and do their best to

make it more humane, more honouring to God. All Christians should ask themselves, on a regular basis, if there is anything holding them back from following Jesus completely and utterly, any lead weights around part of their character or lifestyle. Who knows what the answer will be? All we know is that, when the answer comes, it will be fully in line with the scriptures upon which Jesus was drawing, and even more fully in line with Jesus himself.

In the last analysis, it's all down to God's power. In the previous chapter, we were taught to forgive because God had forgiven us. Here we are taught that the way to follow the God of all power and possibility may well be to give away our own power and possibilities. When God finally transforms all things, then and only then will we discover who his true disciples have been.

TODAY

Lord, make us grateful for all you give us, and ready to give it all back to you.