

Deacon Roger's Homily
Tuesday of the 20th Week in Ordinary Time
August 18, 2020

What we heard in today's Gospel occurs right after the rich young man walked away from Jesus when he heard that in order to be perfect, he needed to sell what he had and give to the poor and then come follow him. Jesus now goes on to underline that difficult refusal. "It will be hard," he said, "for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of heaven."

To illustrate how difficult that was, he used a vivid simile. He said that it was as difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven as it was for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.

The camel was the largest animal which the Jews knew. It is said that sometimes in walled cities there were two gates. There was the great main gate through which all trade and traffic moved. Beside it, there was often a little low and narrow gate. When the great main gate was locked and guarded at night, the only way into the city was through the little gate, through which even a man could hardly pass upright. It is said that sometimes that little gate was called "The Needle's Eye." So it is suggested that Jesus was saying that it was just as difficult for the rich to enter into the Kingdom of heaven as for a huge camel to get through the little gate through which a man can hardly pass. Why is it so difficult for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of heaven? Riches have three main effects on people's outlook.

1. **Riches encourage a false independence.** If people are well supplied with the world's goods, they are apt to think that they can cope with any situation which may arise. If people are wealthy, they are apt to think that everything has its price, that if they want a thing enough they can buy it, that if any difficult situation descends upon them they can buy their way out of it. They can come to think that they can buy their way into happiness and buy their way out of sorrow. So, they come to think that they can well do without God and are quite able to handle life by themselves. There comes a time when people discover that that is an illusion, that there are things which money cannot buy, and things from which money cannot save them. But always there is the danger that great possessions encourage that false independence which thinks – until it learns better – that it has eliminated the need for God.
2. **Riches shackle people to this earth.** "Where your treasure is," said Jesus, "there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). If every desire is contained within this world, if people's interests are all here, they never think of another world and of a hereafter. If people have too big a stake on earth, they are apt to forget that there is a heaven. It is perfectly possible to be so interested in earthly things that heavenly things are forgotten, to be so involved in the things which are seen that the things which are unseen are forgotten – and there lies the tragedy, for things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are unseen are eternal.

3. **Riches tend to make people selfish.** No matter how much we have, it is human for us to want still more. Further, once people have possessed comfort and luxury, they always tend to fear the day when they may lose them. Life becomes a strenuous and worried struggle to retain the things they have. The result is that when people become wealthy, instead of having the impulse to give things away, they very often have the impulse to cling on to them. Their instinct is to amass more and more for the sake of safety and security which they think possessions will bring. The danger of riches is that they tend to make people forget that we lose what we keep, and gain what we give away.

But Jesus did not say that it was impossible for the rich to enter the Kingdom of heaven. Zacchaeus was one of the richest men in Jericho, yet quite unexpectedly he found the way. Joseph of Arimathea was a rich man; Nicodemus must have been very wealthy, for he brought spices to anoint the dead body of Jesus, which were worth a great deal of money. It is not that those who have riches are shut out. It is not that riches are a sin – but they are a danger. The basis of all Christianity is an urgent sense of need; when people have many things on earth, they are in danger of thinking that they do not need God; when they have few things on earth they are often driven to God because they have nowhere else to go.

As far as Peter's question, it would have been very easy for Jesus to dismiss Peter's question with an impatient rebuke. To put it bluntly, Peter was asking, "what do we get out of following you?" Jesus could have said that anyone who followed him in that kind of spirit had no idea what following him meant at all. And yet it was a natural question. Jesus did not scold Peter. He took his question and out of it laid down three great laws of the Christian life.

1. Those who bear the cross will wear the crown.
2. Christians will receive far more than they ever have to give up.
3. Finally, God's standards of judgement are not human standards, those who were humble on earth will be great in heaven, and those who were great in this world will be humbled in the world to come.

Amen!