

PENTECOST XX – 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today's gospel starts off with an interesting little vignette about a young man—we only learn more about him later. He begins by honoring Jesus, calling him “good teacher,” the kind of politeness and respect one might show to someone with a title and/or a reputation. Is that a genuine compliment? Or is he trying to “get over” on Jesus, figuring that if he flatters him, Jesus will give him the affirmation he is seeking?

Jesus is wary. I think any of us become wary when someone begins the way this guy did. There were some people in my diocese who always addressed me as “your grace,” and I went on my guard every time I heard that. Some did not know better and thought that is what you call a bishop, but technically only the six bishops in the Church of England who sit in the House of Lord are addressed that way, making them the equivalent of a Duke, who is addressed as “your grace.” When some people said it to me, it just felt slimy, like I was being covered all over with goo, and I wanted to brush it all off and get out of there. Perhaps that was where Jesus was coming from and decided to stop the guy in his tracks: the only one we call “Good” is God. All of the rest of us are tainted or tarnished in some way.

Jesus doesn't ignore the guy's question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” He doesn't give him the simple answer, which is “nothing.” You cannot earn or buy your way into eternal life. But he does begin a recitation of some of the commandments, implying, perhaps, that if we keep those, we will get what we are seeking. The young man seems caught up in his self-justification, saying, “I've been a

good boy and I've done all of that." But Jesus is not talking about being dutiful, about obeying a set of rules. He's talking about something in the heart, and he challenges the young man to get rid of all of his possessions, to sell them, and then give the money away. Now we see what Jesus has picked up on about this man. He is OK about following all the rules, but for all of that he wants a reward, he wants an assurance that that is enough, and he does not need to even think about this any more. Jesus notices that there is still something between this man and God—in this case, money. He likes being rich, and Jesus senses that he likes it too much. Perhaps he sees that it gives the young man a sense of pride, that he is better than other people. That's one thing a great deal of money can do for us. Perhaps he sees that the young man is stingy, like the priest and the Pharisee who pass by the wounded man on the road, and even walk on the other side so he is not in their path. It is only the stranger, the Samaritan, whose heart goes out to him, and he goes out of his way to get him to good care and to pay for his lodging, food and care. Perhaps the young man does not know that lovely petition in Morning Prayer: "Let not the needy, O Lord, be forgotten; Nor the hope of the poor be taken away." Jesus knows that God's heart is with the poor, and he opens his followers to that every day.

Is this story a diatribe against wealth, against having money? I don't think so. That does not seem to be Jesus' attitude, and he has no problem eating and drinking with rich people, like Zacchaeus, the tax collector. Jesus is always concerned about what we hold between ourselves and God. Money is certainly one of those things. It takes years for most of us human beings to be able to say we have "enough." And rarely do we hear a person complain that he has too much money. I remember a few years ago when I had the luxury of a cruise with a friend that went through the Panama Canal. We approached it from

the west a little past dawn, and we saw for miles along the coast beautiful, gleaming white skyscrapers. I don't know what I expected, but I certainly did not expect to see such an obvious display of wealth. Then one of the other passengers commented, "That's what a country can look like if it is a tax haven for the rich in the US and around the world." Tax havens: that's where we can park money so that we can keep it all. Does that get between a person and God? I think it depends on the person. Years ago, I asked a naughty question of a friend who had just started a foundation: "Are you trying to control your money from the grave, since you cannot take it with you?" Does that get between a person and God? I think it depends on the person. I know a great deal of us here are "comfortable." It would take a major catastrophe or financial upheaval to disrupt and unsettle our finances. But I do not pick up on the kinds of attitudes toward money that I described above.

I do have some questions for us: If we were asked to get rid of some things that stand between us and God, what would they be? Not everything, but some things. I do not think that anyone else can make that judgment for us. We are our own judges in matters like this, and what other people think may easily be envy or some other attitude of their own. But there are times we need to come to a reckoning about such matters, and I think this is one of them.

The COVID virus and the accompanying quarantine, which has limited so many of our activities, gives us the opportunity to do some deeper reflection. What are the things we thought we could not live without that now seem "pleasant parts of our lives," but no longer the necessities we thought them to be? In these 19 months of partial or total isolation, with very few specific plans to look forward to, have we

learned something about staying home, about being home, about being content and at peace where we are?

Another question: I know most of you are like me, able to take a certain number of vacations, to go out to nice dinners with some frequency, able to buy nice clothes or expensive “man-toys,” and we have not been able to do that. I have been saving money during this time. Have you? And how much do you really need to live on, now that you have had a change in your lifestyle and have not died from it? Are you going back to the same pace and spending levels you had before? Or are you going to make some changes? And how does God fit in the picture of any changes you are thinking about making. We are approaching our annual pledge time, and I urge you to think about this now. *Amen.*

+JJJ