

Leaping in faith

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 13 October 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 21B

**Mark 10.17-31; Contemporary Reading: 'Sell all that you have...
and follow me' by Malcolm Guite**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

'What must I do to inherit eternal life?'

Today's Gospel story is a challenging one, and, in the poem we heardⁱ, Malcolm Guite is surely right to ask each of us to wrestle with it and with what God may be asking of us. To assist that engagement, let me speak about three things: about conventional human assumptions of security, about addressing our wealth, and about the deep call of discipleship. Each are certainly key themes of this passage and the wider Gospel. Firstly however, let me share a story from Lincolnshire, the English county in which I grew up...

The tale is known as Byard's Leap, now the name of a south Lincolnshire hamlet, at a key traveller's turning point, on the old Roman road of Ermine Street. Like many legends, it has various forms. At the heart of it however there are three main characters. The first is Old Meg, sometimes portrayed as a witch. A disturbing, and even malevolent seeming figure, some renderings of the story have her blighted in early life by misfortune and injustice. Whatever the reasons, from her hut in the trees, she certainly inflicts tremendous hurt on others, and also comes to be seen as responsible for the spoiling of harvests, causing crops and flourishing to wither and fail.

The second figure is a retired soldier, sometimes portrayed as a knight, who responds to the call of the locals for remedy and Old Meg's removal. He needs the assistance however of a third character, a horse. So the knight goes to a nearby pond from which horses drink. He drops a stone into the pond to see which animal responds most quickly, knowing that, to go up against the bane of the land, he needs a horse which reacts quickly. The most responsive horse is then revealed to be a blind horse, known as Byard. Together, the knight and Byard then set off to confront Old Meg.

Now Old Meg is very crafty and initially tricks the knight, gaining the upper hand and then plunging her long nails into Byard, the blind horse. As a result, Byard leaps, covering a huge mythical distance, still marked locally to this very day by horseshoes. Landing by the pond, the knight then turns and is able to strike the pursuing Old Meg with his sword. Stumbling backwards, Old Meg falls into the pond, drowning, and the people and the land are at last free from her terrible influence.

Now, like any legend, that story can be read in different ways. Around Old Meg, for example, it is possible to reflect on superstition, and, in particular the troubling history of witch-hunting, as well as misfortune and malevolence. It is also extremely likely that the figure of the soldier is related to the medieval order and chivalry of the Knights Templar, who had one of their bases locally. Perhaps however, it is the figure of Byard, the horse, which is, rightly, most remembered. For Byard's Leap is surely partly a symbolic expression of the leap that is always required when we move, often out of great struggle, from one state of life into a greater state of well-being, for ourselves and for others.

Significantly too, the horse is blind. For it is usually not from our obvious abilities that we are transformed but out of our vulnerabilities. Such resonance with Byard's story is at least part of the message of our Gospel story today, where the rich man is called upon to make a profound leap of faith, letting go of his wealth and security to share in fuller life. Instead of following the path of conventional assumptions, meeting moral ideals and being successful in life, Jesus calls him to leap.

The phrase '*a leap of faith*' is of course familiar to us, and used in various contexts, particularly to describe how we can typically enter into significant transformations in our lives. Theologically speaking, the phrase 'the leap of faith' also indicates part of how we experience transformation spiritually. It is closely associated with the great Danish existential philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard. For, whilst valuing reason, Kierkegaard protested against the attempts of the conventional theology of his day to seek a rationalist accommodation with society, essentially simply baptising its ideals and accepting its foundations.

No, said Kierkegaard, based on supposed objective and empirical evidence, reason and morality are not enough for healthy, never mind holy, human existence. Rather, subjectivity – including emotions, intuition, and faith – is crucial to understanding and navigating existence in its depth and full reality. True spiritual life involves a leap of faith into the heart and hands of God. For true Life and Love can never be experienced through calculation or empirical means alone. It is the commitment of faith which leads to purpose and direction in life, to meaning and fulfilment.

The Gospel story of the rich man embodies this call to undertake the way of Jesus as a leap of faith. Indeed, like the Byard's Leap legend, the very form of this story is like its message: namely a challenge to engage in the adventure of life rather than a coherent rational account of how to journey forward. For if we are challenged by the story, we should be. Its details are not easily resolvable, especially on specifics of how to live. It is in that sense more like a parable, teasing us and seeking to provoke us into leaping. For the moment however, let us reflect on three aspects...

Firstly, our Gospel story certainly challenges conventional human assumptions, not least about the importance of ordinary 'goodness'. For, whilst the rich man seems obsessed by what is 'good', including addressing Jesus as 'Good Teacher', Jesus is calling him beyond moral standards to true wholeness, beyond 'goodness' to God, and to God's call in our lives. Significantly therefore, Jesus first responds to the rich man with the key commandments about human morality, which the man affirms he keeps, yet is remains dissatisfied. This is because striving for human goodness is not enough. We need to attend to the other key commandments, which concern our relationship with God. Seeking to live up to conventional human assumptions and aspirations of a good life or a good community are insufficient for spiritual well-being.

The temptation to live like the rich man is very real. For, as Eugene Peterson once put it, '*Christian spirituality is not about us. It is about God*'.ⁱⁱ Yet this runs against powerful trends in contemporary spirituality, within and beyond churches. Too much is indeed 'all about us: fulfilling our potential, getting the blessings of God, expanding our influence, getting a handle on principles': in other words, the concerns of the rich man. However, in Peterson's words:

Christian spirituality is not a life-project for becoming a better person. It is not about developing a so-called deeper life. We are in on it, to be sure, but we are not the subject. Nor are we the action. We get included by means of a few prepositions: God with us (Matt. 1:23), Christ in me (Gal. 2:20), God for us (Rom. 8:31). With, in, for: They are powerful, connecting, relation-forming words, but none of them makes us either the subject or the predicate. We are the tag-end of a prepositional phrase... We are invited or commanded into what I call prepositional participation...

We cannot participate in God's work but then insist on doing it in our own way... Christ is the way as well as the truth and the life.

The rich man in today's Gospel story is clearly trying hard to be a good person. His problem is that he is trying too hard and not leaving space for God. Jesus therefore looks on him kindly whilst challenging him to let go and let God take over, encouraging him to take a leap of faith: learning to trust and participate in God's way rather than in his reason, reflection, and human calculations alone. Like all of us, the rich man has to let go of his attempts to secure his life in order to save it.

Secondly, our Gospel story calls us to face up to questions of wealth. This is easily softened by preachers and commentators, sometimes with ingenious means such as fictitious creations to explain phrases such as 'it is harder for a camel to get through the eye of a needle'. For, as Malcolm Guite's poem articulates, this challenge is deeply uncomfortable, particularly for church communities and their members in rich Western countries like our own.

To be fair, picking up on what I have just said, the issue of wealth is intimately related to the core issue of where we seek our security. It is possible, of course, to be a poor, or relatively poor, person and still be like the rich man: in seeking our security in other things, including power and fame, as well as moral purity and/or righteousness of belief and action. Yet, like Malcolm Guite, we should not underplay the challenge of this passage to our human wealth.

It is not that God despises wealth. Jesus is clear, in his response to Peter's consternation, that such blessings might accompany following the way of God he was calling the rich man to follow. However, these are neither reflections nor guarantees of following the way. Rather what truly matters is whether we are willing to leap into the love of God unconditionally. Sadly, like the rich man in our story, those of us who have wealth will find it hard to leap because we are so weighed down.

For, thirdly, and most importantly, our Gospel story today calls into deep discipleship. This is the heart of the Gospel, not seeking security of any other kind.

Discipleship, following Christ, is neither about identifying and cohering with the highest human ideals and standards, nor about accumulating or holding onto wealth. It is always about responding to the call of God, come what may, in our vulnerabilities not our apparent strengths. The rich man remains anxious and perplexed until he is able to leap, until he enters into prepositional participation.

One of the greatest images of such leaping, of such prepositional participation, is baptism. For, as Christians have always understood it, baptism is a sacrament of participation in the mystery of Christ: letting go, or leaping into, the waters of vulnerability and death, so that we may be with Christ, that Christ may be in us, and Christ for us in all we experience.

We do not know whether the rich man took that leap, whether he was baptised into the life of Christ, participating in salvation instead of mere security. However, we are always faced by that choice, daily in our own lives.

How will we respond to the call of Jesus? Will we choose to live our lives, and build our communities, on human ideals and goals, on wealth or other securities, or will we leap, with Peter and our Christian forebears, into the love and discipleship of God?

In conclusion, I come back to Byard's Leap. For, in my own version of the story, there is another twist. It is not only the blind horse that leaps, and the knight with them, but Old Meg too. Like the rich man meeting Jesus, when she is plunged into the waters, it is like a shock to the system, shaking her out of her old (in)securities and separateness. She does not in fact drown, except in the sense of baptism. Rather, she rises back to the surface, shorn of all she has clung to for identity, and helped by the knight and the blind horse.

With, in, and for, one another, we thereby walk the path of deep discipleship and enter into eternal life.

In the name of Jesus, who gazes on us with eternal love
and invites us to leap into it. Amen.

ⁱ [Jesus and our wealth: dwelling with a hard saying | Malcolm Guite \(wordpress.com\)](https://www.malcolmguite.com/2017/05/13/jesus-and-our-wealth-dwelling-with-a-hard-saying/)

ⁱⁱ [Transparent lives | The Christian Century](https://www.thechristiancentury.com/2017/05/13/transparent-lives/)