

Reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Lent. Matthew 19

Jesus is continuing his journey to Jerusalem. He has passed through Samaria, with a short stopover in the town of Sychar, and he now arrives in Judea, beyond the Jordan river. Matthew tells us that a large crowd follows Him. This would fill the leaders of the Jews with anxiety. They are constantly looking over their shoulders at the occupying Roman presence by whose leave they try to govern. A large crowd gathering could spell trouble. A large crowd with an extremely well thought of leader is a recipe for disaster. So, they look for ways to discredit this teacher who is disturbing them. Some Pharisees come with a question about divorce, always a tricky subject. So they ask, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?' Most of us would be hesitant to enter into a discussion with a lawyer on a point of law, but Jesus is not like us. He replies, "Have you not read the scriptures that God made male and female and that those whom God has joined together let none separate." The emphasis being on the joining together in front of God, by God. 'Why then', the Pharisees ask, 'did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce.' Jesus answers that Moses permitted divorce because they were so 'hard hearted' but divorce, except in the case of unchastity, followed by remarriage, is adultery. One suspects that the lawyers had been complicit in allowing a lax system of divorce which allowed men to divorce their wives on a whim sending them home to their families to live a life of hardship. Another attempt to catch Jesus out has failed. Once more Jesus does not take a liberal line that they could suggest was illegal, inciting the crowds to revolt, but reinforces the law.

Someone comes with another question 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' Was this another trick question? We cannot be certain, but Jesus responds with an entreaty to follow the commandments, all of them. The questioner replies, 'I have done all this but what more must I do?' Jesus suggests that he sells all that he has and gives the money away. For a wealthy man this seems to be a step too far. Jesus goes on to point out the problem of wealth. Wealth that gets in the way. Wealth that becomes all consuming. It is a lesson that our consumerist society might benefit from today.

The disciples are concerned, 'Who then can be saved?' they ask. Jesus says that for mortals it is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Salvation then comes by faith - faith is God's ability and willingness to save and care for us all. Peter says, 'We have dropped everything to follow you, where does that leave us?' Jesus tells them that anyone who has left their earthly life behind for the sake of God will inherit eternal life.

As Jesus continues on this fateful journey to Jerusalem, He is being tested by those along the way, as indeed we are as we make our way through life. Also, He is reminding us of the positive things. He reminds us that if we focus on God we, too, can be forgiven where we fall short. We have the promise that we will inherit eternal life.

*Creator God, we know we have limits.
There are lots of things we can't do.
We also know that you have no limits.
Fill us with the strength, courage, and ability
needed to pursue and complete difficult things.
When we run into obstacles,
help us climb over them.
We ask for your help in making it possible
Amen*