

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen

When Julian of Norwich wrote that down that insight, that God makes, loves, and keeps us, she was proclaiming the whole Gospel message. If you indeed wish to know the Gospel message, and why it is such 'good news', listen to what St. Mark reveals in this reading. This account of a rich young man and his personal conversation with Jesus was repeated some years later when the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were written, but the story seems most compelling and provocative in Mark, and demonstrates why the Gospel message is perplexing and often misunderstood. It is, truly, good news, but very hard to swallow and digest. Mark seldom uses unnecessary words, very little embellishment, so what he does say typically deserves a second look. Jesus was getting ready to leave for a journey; he was preoccupied perhaps with the preparations, when a young man came running up and knelt before him. Jesus didn't send him away, but stopped what he was doing to pay full attention. This is a key to the Gospel message: God is never too busy to receive each of us personally. God makes us, loves us, and keeps us. God hears every question; God is fully and persistently present to each of us. The author of the New Testament Book of Hebrews writes that, thanks to the reassurance of Christ, we should approach God with boldness, as this young man has, so that we find grace to help in time of need.

The young man asks Jesus a question, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' to which Jesus responds, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.' This is a second key to the Gospel message: God alone is truly good, beyond what we can aspire to be. We mortals tend by our nature to become broken rather than whole. We are beloved, but fragile. We lack the power to put ourselves back together without God's help. All the king's horses and all the king's men can't repair what the world does to us or even what we do to ourselves. We are helpless. When, as we read last week, Jesus tells his followers that we need to be as children to enter the Kingdom, he doesn't only mean that children are such lovely, sweet things, but that we must admit, as children must, that we are unable to care for ourselves. Children are unable to feed themselves, shelter themselves, protect themselves, transport themselves, or educate themselves. Surely, age and experience eventually give us the illusion of self-determination, but to enter the kingdom we need to remember our cosmic helplessness. We must be as infants, we must be as we were made. God has seen this broken world through the incarnation, through the eyes, ears, and touch of Jesus himself. The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus is therefore able to sympathize with our weakness.

Notice the wording of the young man's question, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' Notice he doesn't ask how to *earn* eternal life. Jesus looks at him and loves him, loves his question, loves his intentions to be a child of God, a child who inherits God's grace, who seems to know that it cannot be earned. No amount of good deeds, no diligent obedience, no sacrificial lambs, no money pledged to the church would be enough to buy seats at the banquet set from the foundation of the world. They are not for sale. They are waiting for us at the 'will-call' window. God has made us; we are God's children; we are in God's holy will and testament. We are already in eternal life. Fear not says the Bible, over and over again. God is with us, working to repair our broken lives in ways which are mysterious and above and beyond our own pay-grade. Trust God. This is the good news. This is the Gospel.

But the story continues. The young man says that since his youth he has lived his life faithfully. He has not committed murder or adultery, he has not lied or stolen, and he has honored his family. Here we encounter something else the Bible is famous for: a guide to good living. The scriptures, as you know, contain guidelines, rules, advice, commandments, and rubrics for living well. The first and foremost is the so-called 'Golden Rule' which says to love God and your neighbor as yourself, treating others as you yourself would be treated. But obedience to this rule will not bring you any special reward. No, but it *will* have a consequence: a fulfilling life, perhaps a joyful life, an adventurous life, an awesome life, the life of a disciple. The kind of life those in the kingdom enjoy. Salvation is a gift which cannot be earned or repaid by mortal man, says the Gospel, *but* choosing to live justly and righteously *will* bring a consequence of significance. Think of it this way: in preparing a dish-to-pass to bring to the great banquet, use the Bible as a cookbook, and all will delight in your accomplishment, including you.

At this point in our lesson from Mark, Jesus adds a further rubric to the one the young man has known from scripture: he should sell his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow in the way of Christ. Last weekend we marked the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi; because Francis was known for preaching love to and for the animals, we had a service to ask God's blessing on them. Francis was also known for his vows of poverty, so as to be in solidarity

with the poor in those regions of Italy where he walked and preached. Wanting to imitate Christ, he became one of them to authenticate the gift he yearned to give them. His gift to them was the Gospel message. As a young, privileged man, Francis became sensitized to the diseased and poor around him, and decided to follow Jesus' advice to this other young man, and sell what he had, give to the poor, and follow as a disciple would. His Father, a tailor and a man of great civic influence, tried to dissuade him, and even gained him an audience with the Bishop, in order that he might be convinced to change his mind and realize that he could be of more real help to the poor as a rich benefactor. With the courage of his convictions, Francis stood and removed all his fine clothes, presenting himself naked before the Bishop, something I doubt I would have the courage to do, God help me.

Like most human beings, perhaps all human beings, I find it so difficult to strip away all my pretensions, all my idolatry of possessions, and stand authentically in the midst of others. It is hard enough to know my *own* authentic self, who I am, really. It's like a camel trying to go through the eye of a needle, sometimes. Yet, I would like to try. In fact, I take joy in trying...not to win an award, but to have a fulfilling life among you. Jesus tells the young man that if he acts on this minimalist advice, he will have treasure in heaven. But I don't think that means a heavenly reward, nor do I think he is speaking of gold rings and treasury bills. I believe he is speaking of the fine consequence of relationships which last a lifetime and beyond, with treasured friends who have known us in our struggle to be authentic, and who will delight in whatever it is we bring from home to the banquet table. I have spent some brief time in Italy, where Francis is the Patron Saint, and I can tell you that wherever his name is mentioned, faces light up with recognition and enchantment. But I will tell you, too, that after 800 years he is as well remembered for his constancy, his devotion to his vows, as for any holy miracles. He took this scripture about the rich young man literally and seriously, not with any expectation of reward, or fame, but that his life might be of good consequence in service. His reputation, at home and abroad, is one of determined love in the face of personal hardship, discomfort, and disease.

The wisdom that Jesus brings to this conversation with the young rich man is brilliant. When we shed our addiction to riches, as did Francis, we become like the helpless children, daily recognizing that we just can't save ourselves. We then have no short-term solution to our own vulnerability except to turn to the grace of God. Francis became the Gospel message. Francis said that it is pointless for us to walk somewhere to preach, unless our walking is *itself* a way of preaching the Gospel. By taking Jesus' guidance, Francis made his life an iconic reminder that God alone makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Trust in God alone for salvation. We have so many choices in God's generous creation to choose from, as we try to build a faithful and fulfilling life. By choosing well, we can open doors to all manner of good results. How do we discern the best choices? Where can we find the best guidance? Well, who is it who gives advice to the rich young man in the story? God, we believe, is speaking through and as Jesus of Nazareth, our great high priest; God is revealing this teaching about the distractions of wealth and privilege in a conversation with the Christ himself.

What a time to have been alive in Palestine! When one could actually interrupt God's own Son, who was busy with some ministry or another, and ask for advice right there on the spot! Truth to tell, though, it is our Christian hope and expectation that God *continues* to guide us, especially when we choose to ask. God makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Just that, in these latter days, we must listen with the ear of our hearts, so to speak, a skill which takes patience and practice. For one of the fine consequences of a long heritage of good decisions is the community which meets here. May God continue to both bless and guide us, and may we remember to prayerfully ask. Asking that, in the name of Christ, we may be a community of harmony, reconciliation, and cheerful service.

We are not told what becomes of the young man in the story, except that he is shocked and distressed by Jesus' guidance, and that he goes away grieving. Was he able to make any changes in his life to accommodate this new teaching? Did he understand that his effort to live a good life, while it had important consequences, was not that which would make him perfect and complete, that God alone is truly good and the author of salvation? The disciples, overhearing this conversation, and misunderstanding, are also shocked. If this is the rubric, they ask, then who *can* be saved? Jesus looks at them and says, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.' The good news is that, while we cannot save ourselves, we can trust that our salvation is part of God's dream. God makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Meanwhile, though, proclaim the Gospel even in the face of persecution, and set about the work, with God's guidance, of building God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, even in the face of puzzling, paradoxical, provocative, perplexing predictions such as 'Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.' Amen.