

Sermon

'Far from the shallows'

Year B 2021, Pentecost 20, Mark 10.17-31



In the 2018 movie *A Star is Born*, Jackson, a musician, falls in love with Ally, a struggling artist. Jackson coaxes Ally to follow her dreams, while he battles with alcoholism and his personal demons. Her dream is realized when Jackson calls Ally to the stage at one of his concerts, in front of what seems, the world. In a moving duet, Jackson asks Ally:

Tell me something girl-

Are you happy in this modern world?

Or do you need more?

Is there something else you're searching for?

To which Ally replies:

Tell me something boy...

Aren't you tired trying to fill that void?

Or do you need more?

Ain't it hard keeping it so hard core

I'm falling..

We're far from the shallows now.

Jackson and Ally are lost. And need to be found. A Star is Born is a tragedy. A cautionary tale, of the need to go deeper. Beneath the shallows.

In our Gospel reading today, we follow Jesus, far from the shallows. As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.'

A rich man, the man had observed the law summoning him to love his neighbour. But the man had not observed the first and greatest commandment, to love God, and to put him first in his life. Money had become an idol to him. You cannot love God and wealth. But when Jesus reaches in to remove the speck from the man's eye, to give him treasure in heaven, the man was shocked, and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of heaven.'

And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved.' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals this is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

Like Ally and Jackson, the man is lost. And needs to be found. The Gospel is a tragedy. A cautionary tale, of the need to go deeper. To go beyond the shallows. To go more deeply. In the kingdom of this world, the self puts itself in the place of God. In the kingdom of God, the self is put in its proper place.

As Lucy and I heard watching Ted Lasso on Netflix last night.

‘The truth will set you free.’

But it will make you grumpy at first.

And make you want to run away.

For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

‘The truth will set you free.’

But it will make you grumpy first.

Like the man in our Gospel.

Who went away grieving.

‘Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.’

In this world, the self wants for itself the place of God. To be the highest good. In the kingdom of God, the self is put in its proper place. God alone is the highest good.

In the world, the self wants for itself the place of God. Seeks to invert the natural order. The natural justice. The creature that must worship and serve the creator God, seeks to make itself the Creator God. Putting the things of this world in service of themselves. In worship of themselves. That is the natural human sin of pride. The pride that separates us from God, from ourselves, from one another. The pride that promises us life, a deeper, richer, fuller life, but that delivers us into spiritual death.

And God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’

‘What must we do to inherit eternal life?’ We must repent of the sin of human pride. The pride that imagines itself to be God. The pride that imagines itself to be good. The pride that imagines that it is not a sinner. And that, from that place of its own moral high ground, looks down on the people around them. From the dizzying heights of their own self-righteousness. That is the real problem with

the rich man. It is not that he is rich in material wealth. It is that he is rich in himself. He is rich in human pride. He has come to imagine, that he is God. The human sin of pride. That is the real problem.

In Luke's Gospel we read that Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

There is a way out of human pride. A way through the human problem, ancient, and modern. That is the way of Jesus. The way of humbling ourselves, before God. The way of prayer, penitence, and repentance, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner.' And there to see our human pride, along with Luther, nailed to the cross.

By his life of humble obedience to the mission that he received from God the Father, a mission that he sealed with his death, for the reconciliation of the

world to God, Christ has turned the tables on the world. By the marvellous exchange of God, in the death of Christ on the cross.

As with Jesus' own experience in the wilderness, for this, it will need to enter a time in the wilderness – that it may learn the most difficult spiritual discipline – to follow Jesus, in radical refusal of the powers of the present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, that tempt us to want to be God. Like Jesus, we must break the shackles. We must break the chains. We must follow Jesus, in the worship and service of God alone.

Amidst, and against, the modern secular doctrine of the human person –the false teachers – ‘the foxes’ – who seek to kill the religion of Christ - the Christian doctrine of the human person remains. Made in the image of God, we are, all of us, sinners. For whom the Word of God – the reconciliation of the world to God in the death of Christ - remains. The old rugged cross will survive the rising tide of modern secular doctrine. Beyond every merely human cultural understanding, it is the Word, of God. By which we, an unjust humanity, may be made just. And not by our own merit – but by the merit of Christ alone. Because the future judgment of God, has already now come, in him. Brought forward. By which, the modern need for justice, is met. In Jesus Christ, and him crucified. By whom the just already now live - by faith. ‘Very truly, I tell you the truth, this person went down to his home justified, and not the other. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves, will be exalted.’

Rev'd Jon Chamberlain

Vicar