

This morning, I'm going to set you all a challenge from the pulpit. Which of you is going to do what Jesus told the rich young man this morning, and sell what you have, and give it to the poor?

I'm serious. Will somebody here, today, stick up their hand – I don't want you to interrupt my sermon right now, but will somebody say to me at the south porch after the service, "Yes, Gerry. I'm in. I'll get the estate agents to put the house on the market tomorrow, I'm giving the car to a young person without much money to whom it would really make a difference, and the family silver is going on eBay this afternoon."

I'm mean it. If any of you takes up the challenge, I'll stand you lunch at The Peppermill straight afterwards, along with a decent bottle or two, and you can come and stay with me for a month or two while you work out how you're going to live your new vocation as a wandering mendicant, living entirely off the charity of others, for the sake of Christ.

Somebody here should give it a go. In this morning's Gospel, Jesus has promised you treasure in heaven if you do, and in fact he promised you houses, families, and fields in this world as well. Along, it has to be said, with some persecutions. But it will all balance out as a big net positive. So, what are you waiting for?

Oh, by the way, no not me, I can't do it. I know I'm single and I have no dependants, but I'm the curate and I have to stay here and minister unto you. It wouldn't be fair, especially to you, for you to lose your wonderful curate who is, of course, entirely irreplaceable. Also, the Diocese would never pass me to go on and apply for my first incumbency.

The apostles reacted much in the manner that most of us do after hearing this challenge to the Rich Young Man, and then Jesus telling them that God's standards were so high that it was almost impossible to get into heaven. They moaned. And Jesus answered them, that for mortals it was impossible, but for God, all things are possible.

You can't win heaven. You cannot meet God's exacting standards. God made us human beings to be flawed. We will, you and I, often make complete messes of things. Acknowledging this is a liberating, life-affirming, idea in a world where our worth is too often measured by our achievements, and our failures are too quickly pounced on by an increasingly angry and unforgiving culture. It is liberating and life-affirming because if you can't meet God's standards then you can't earn God's love. God loves you anyway, just as you are. He undoubtedly wants you to live your life differently in some ways than you do at present. You could certainly be better than you are – I know I could be. But you are loved by God.

Following Jesus Christ isn't about getting enough marks on some sort of cosmic exam of life so the divine headmaster will let you to scrape into heaven; it's about living your life as if Jesus Christ, who is God, has already opened the way to heaven for you. Because he has – on the Cross, on the first Good Friday. He then rescued you from Hell when he harrowed it and led the souls held captive by the Devil to freedom on the following day, the first Easter Eve. And he celebrated eternal life with you in the presence of His Father and ours on that first Easter Day. This has already happened. As creatures bounded by time for the span of this earthly life, we just haven't experienced it yet. But, in the words of the hymn: Love's redeeming work is done – two thousand years ago already!

"The word of God is living and active ... it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart", says this morning's Epistle reading, from the letter to the Hebrews. Scripture is many things at the same time, and one of them is a mirror; what we take from Scripture often reflects what is in our hearts and souls.

The great Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, wrote a book in the 1970s named *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved?"*. In it, he listed the many statements in the New Testament that speak of some souls being lost for eternity; and he also listed an equally impressive list of statements that God has both the ability and the will to save all people. Let us remember that nobody can ultimately prevent God getting what He wills: as Jesus reminds us in this morning's Gospel, "for God, all things are possible."

Balthasar noted that the statements speaking of eternal damnation are primarily made by the pre-Easter Jesus, while those promising the salvation of all are principally contained in Paul and John, with the triumph of the Cross visible in hindsight. So he did indeed hope that all might be saved.

By the way, in case anyone thinks this is a sort of watery secularised Christianity stripped of all the hard bits, Balthasar was the favourite theologian of Pope John Paul the Second, who was not exactly a liberal, as you may remember.

For me, personally, aesthetics is the way of resolving the tension between these seemingly contradictory groups of statements. What is the most beautiful vision of the ultimate reality? It seems obvious to my mind that the Christian faith is most beautiful if the ultimate end of human beings is heaven. For it is only then that our love for God can be as free and unforced as His love for us. It is when we embrace this reality, that we free ourselves from the mug's game of seeing faith as a matter of punishment and reward.

As Scripture is in part a mirror, I would rather that it reflected from my heart a hope that I shall in heaven embrace even my bitterest enemies as brothers and sisters, than a terror that even those whom I love and admire might be subject to eternal torment for believing the wrong things, or for getting just too many penalty points in some sort of ghastly test of life. And anyone who thinks that embracing one's enemies is a cheap or easy Gospel has never tried to do it.

Beyond Scripture, if we take the statement in the Apostles' Creed, "He descended into Hell", seriously, it leads us to ask what Christ might be doing there – this is what leads us to the wonderful doctrine of the Harrowing of Hell, that in between Good Friday and Easter Morning, Christ is in Hell defeating Satan, and leading the souls he has taken captive to freedom. I take the prospect of Hell seriously, but I also believe that God has the power and the will to defeat it in the end.

Embracing this frees us to read our Bibles and come to the altar with open hearts and open souls, seeking to be led into the deeper love that leads to a fuller life, rather than seeking a magic get-out-of-Hell free card, or an excuse to damn others to Hell. It is only then that we can embrace the Rich Young Man as our brother and accept that like him, we aren't holy enough for God, and we aren't good enough for God – but we are loveable enough for God.

Your job is to be a faithful human being, not to play God. If you aren't willing to sell everything you have and follow Jesus, right here and now, you certainly aren't good enough to muscle in on Jesus Christ's job of judging the world.

Or maybe one of you will surprise me, and tell me after the service that you're going to do what Jesus told the rich young man to do. If so, I'll book the table at The Peppermill while you stick the family silver on eBay.

Now to the only wise God our saviour, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.