

Introductory

This text has parallels in Matthew (19: 23ff) and Luke (18: 224ff). This, and none of those texts are appointed to be read in the TLH one-year lectionary. In LW, Mark 10: 17-27 (28-30) is the text for Pentecost 21B, notably leaving off “the first shall be last and the last first.” The and Luke texts are absent from the three-year series in LW and LSB.

Textual Notes

23. Mark tells that “περιβλεψάμενος ὁ Ἰησοῦς – Jesus looked around,” and the implication is that He sees that the man who had run up to Him has now gone away from Him. He began talking to the disciples about riches, proclaiming, “Πῶς δυσκόλως οἱ τὰ χρήματα ἔχοντες – How difficult those having riches” to enter the Kingdom of God, i.e. to become and remain Christians.

The response of the Rich Young Ruler to Jesus’ invitation to him to apostleship is on His mind when He says here what He says here. However, we ought not to get the idea that the man’s eschewing of The Apostolic Office somehow rendered him ineligible to be a Christian. Who would ever say that such is the case now, and no more was it the case then.

Coming off His blessing of the children, for whom entrance into the Kingdom is easy as falling off a log, it is just the opposite for the man with great riches. The adverb “δυσκόλως – hard” is rare in the NT, occurring only here and in the two parallels, and it means doing something that is well-nigh impossible to do, like putting a thing in a hole that is too small for it.

Aristotle calls χρήματα “all things of which the value is measured in coinage” (BCLY). It’s the same word used to describe the Rich Young Ruler’s “possessions” or “assets.” The problem with having things is that things can be distracting. Distractions are what keep people out of Divine Service, away from Word and Sacrament, which can kill you, spiritually speaking.

Another problem with having things is that the more things you have, the less you tend to think you need God. Think of Israel for the entire period of the Judges, a seemingly never ending cycle of trust, prosperity, apathy towards God, disaster, deliverance by God at the hand of a judge, and renewed prosperity, and repeat.

24. Upon hearing this, “οἱ δὲ μαθηταὶ ἐθαμβοῦντο ἐπὶ τοῖς λόγοις αὐτοῦ - His disciples were terrified at His words.” The verb is in the imperfect tense – they started and they kept it up – and it makes only two other appearances in the NT, in Mark (1:27), to describe the reaction of the crowd to Jesus’ first casting out of demons at Capernaum.

The other occurrence is later on here (32), right after the hit the road at the conclusion of this pericope. Luke uses the noun cognate of the verb three times (4:36, 5:9, Acts 3:10) to describe the response of people to things that are miraculous or supernatural, and many of these other uses of the word are describing the emotional response to dramatic, traumatic events.

But what's so traumatic about Jesus saying it's hard for rich men to get into the Kingdom? In the NT, Jesus and later the Christian writers of the epistles manifest a higher regard for the poor than they do for the rich. Indeed, the first Christians tended to be slaves, women, and poor people, and the rich were more likely than not to be the Church's tormentor.

The response of Jesus to their terror is “ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς πάλιν ἀποκριθεὶς λέγει αὐτοῖς Τέκνα, πῶς δύσκολόν ἐστιν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ εἰσελθεῖν - Jesus again responded, saying to them, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter into the Kingdom of God.’” The verb is translated “responded” because what He says is in response to what they are feeling; the feeling of terror.

He comforts them in their terror by calling them His children, harkening back to earlier in this chapter and to the ease of the child in getting into the Kingdom. Some of the manuscripts add “τοὺς πεποιθότας ἐπὶ χρήμασιν – those trusting riches,” which makes a lot of sense and is rather implied even without those words. KJV and many other translations also have those words.

It seems odd that there are no variant readings in the parallels from Matthew and Luke, and what does this mean? It means that several Mark copyists saw fit to add the clarifying words, and that none of the other copyists did. Or it means that the Mark copyists took those words out to make it conform to Matthew and Luke, or to condemn all rich men, not just some.

Or it means that we don't know what it means. At any rate, the point Jesus is making to them, in response to their terror, is to call them children, and then tell them that it's “δύσκολόν – hard to enter the Kingdom of heaven. That's the adjective cognate to the adverb we talked about earlier, and it speaks to the difficulty of putting the square peg into the round hole.

25. Or putting a camel through the eye of a needle. The needle is not a new invention, but has been around for a long time; right after thread was invented, then cloth, then the needle. While the material used to make the needle has changed over time – ours are mostly made of metal and maybe plastic - the design of the needle has remained fundamentally the same over time.

The saying used here by Jesus seems to be an adaptation of a common saying having to do with an elephant, rather than a camel, passing through the eye of a needle.

The Babylonian Talmud applies the aphorism to unthinkable thoughts. To explain that dreams reveal the thoughts of a man's heart, the product of reason rather than the absence of it, the rabbis say; ‘They do not show a man a palm tree of gold, nor an elephant going through *the eye of a needle*.’ A Midrash on the Song of Songs uses the phrase to speak of God's willingness and ability beyond

comparison, to accomplish the salvation of a sinner: ‘The Holy One said, open for the a door as big as a needle’s eye and I will open for you a door though which may enter tents and (camels?)’ Rav Sheishet of Nehardea applies the same aphorism to the convoluted reasoning for which the sages of Pumbedita were evidently famous: "Are you from Pumbedita, where they push an elephant through the eye of a needle?" (Baba Metzia, 38b) (WIK).

Calling it a proverb, Bullinger states the obvious; “this was a proverbial expression for a thing very unusual and very difficult.” He then quotes Lightfoot quoting the same verses mentioned in the WIK article, and we must conclude that Lightfoot is the true source for the assertion that “eye of a needle” was a common expression in the rabbinical thought of the day.

Lightfoot (as quoted in Bullinger) quotes the gloss, “a thing which he was not wont to see, nor concerning which he had ever thought,” and then quotes another rabbinical saying about one “who can make an elephant pass through the eye of a needle” (759). And that’s probably too much on this saying whose meaning is abundantly obvious.

26. Which is met with more and increased astonishment; “οἱ δὲ περισσῶς ἐξεπλήσσοντο – they were exceedingly astonished.” The adverb is a not common intensifier, making only seventeen appearances in the NT, and the verb is even less common, being found thirteen times, and has connotations of inability to comprehend and maybe even a little bit of panic.

They seem to be completely at a loss to explain His perfectly clear words, which their words reveal that they understand completely; “λέγοντες πρὸς ἑαυτοὺς Καὶ τίς δύναται σωθῆναι – saying to each other ‘So, who can be saved?’” They don’t put their rhetorical query to Jesus, but discuss it among themselves, and are we having fun yet?

Looking at their response to what Jesus says about rich men here and earlier (24), we have to ask what about those words bothered them to this panicked frenzy? The answer to that question may be found at the end of John (21), where we find this merry band post-Resurrection, before pre-Ascension, up in Galilee, in “the boat” and fishing.

To review, before the crucifixion, Jesus had told them to go up to Galilee and wait for Him. Upon His crucifixion, they had gone into that closed and locked room, holed up in fear. At least twice, Jesus came into that room, and eventually they did make their way up to Galilee, where He found them fishing. With a boat. Where did they get that boat?

The words of Jesus about rich men and the Kingdom of God disturbed them greatly because they were that man. To be sure, they had dropped their nets, left their business and followed Jesus, but at least one of them had kept an ace up his sleeve. At least one of them had at least one asset, and when Jesus lists what they have left, their boats are not included.

27. Having cleverly preached the Law, the desired result having been achieved, they are now ready for the Gospel, and He delivers; He looks at them and says “Παρά ἀνθρώποις ἀδύνατον, ἀλλ’ οὐ παρὰ θεῶ· πάντα γὰρ δυνατὰ παρὰ τῷ θεῷ – with men, (it is) impossible, but not with God. All things (are) possible with God.”

The words commonly translated “impossible” and “possible” are the same word with the negator added to the first, and the word is usually translated “power,” and of the negative we might say “impotent.” When it comes to talk of entering the Kingdom of Heaven, man has no power, and is utterly helpless to do that.

But (emphatically) what is impossible with man is very much possible with God, who has that power infinitely. The rich man especially is utterly unable to save himself, and it’s hard for the rich man to get into the Kingdom of Heaven, but God can save even that poor wretch, and if He can save even that poor wretch of a rich man, He can save well nigh anybody.

28. And yes, He can save even you Peter, who can’t take yes for an answer. He seems to want to return to self and remind Jesus the great sacrifice he and they have made, “Ἴδοὺ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν πάντα καὶ ἠκολουθήκαμέν σοι – Behold, we have left all, and followed You.” The first verb in an aorist, and the second is in the perfect tense, past action with results continuing.

Indeed, the results of their simple act of heeding the call and of following Him were continual; it really must have disrupted their lives to be pulled away so suddenly and dramatically. Matthew (4:22) tells us that Peter and Andrew “Immediately, they left their nets and followed Him,” and of James and John (22), they “left the boat and their father” and followed Him.

We might also conclude that Matthew the Tax Collector had money. Simon was a political junkie, and “zealot” who worked to overthrow the Roman occupation, and may have killed people, but there’s really no money in that. As to the rest of the Twelve, and as to the Seventy Apostles, we don’t really have much information about their lives before becoming Apostles.

If we conclude that it must therefore not be important, we have also to conclude that the occupations of the fishermen and the tax collector were important. We have spoken before about how precious is space in the Bible, given the cost of writing materials, and they take the time and space to tell us about the fishermen and their boats.

29. Apparently at least some of them were landowners. He responds to Peter’s claim of having left “everything” by listing some of the things that Apostles have given up to do what they do; house or home, brothers and sisters, mothers and father, children and land. These sound like separate components, and those separate components make up a home and family.

Even today, for most Americans, the house is base camp for the family, the place where you naturally gather together. When we get together with my family, it is in the house where I and

we grew up, and when my children and grandchild come home, they stay in our house. After thirteen years here, the fruit trees bear fruit, and the place just feels like home.

To those who leaves that one thing behind, He says, “ἐνεκεν ἐμοῦ καὶ ἐνεκεν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου – for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel.” People can and people do leave it all behind all the time for a lot of different things. The caveat here is that you leave it behind for the apostolic office, for Jesus and the Gospel, which grammatically stand in apposition to one another.

30. About that person and his loss, “ἐὰν μὴ λάβῃ ἑκατονταπλασίονα νῦν ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τούτῳ - should he not take a hundredfold in this time” all those things, save one. He has left father behind, but will not receive a hundredfold fathers. We could imagine what a hundred brothers and sisters look like, but what do a hundred mothers look like?

It looks like a hyperbole of some kind, like when the father tells the son that there are a hundred blondes just like her out there or something like that. That’s the thing about hyperbole; the exaggeration is so great that nobody thinks it means what it says literally. So what does a hundred mothers look like? Maybe they look like churches.

31. Concluding with the familiar oxymoron about the first and the last, He underscores the difference in the way the world sees things as distinct from the way Christians see things. The meaning of “first” and “last” is not in relation to time, but in relation to rank and importance. The way the world looks at rich and poor is different from the way Christians do.

Law/Gospel

Rich and Poor

Impossible and Possible

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