

Sermon preached in St Stephen's Uniting Church Macquarie Street, Sydney 11th October 2015 by Rev Ross Smith. Lectionary: Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31.

Love in Action

Love in action: these words trigger a memory from my student days. I read in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Bonhoeffer himself came to his death because of his campaign against the Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler. He had been imprisoned since 1942 but he was executed just before Germany was liberated.

He was executed because the powers-that-be didn't want his live testimony against them to be heard. For Bonhoeffer, giving his life and death to opposing Hitler was "love in action."

Each of us has a image of what love in action looks like, how it sounds and what kind of response is usually made to a loving action or word. For me, a key image is of someone doing something or speaking a word that stops the flow, causes another to cease what they are saying or doing.

That word or action brings about a reflection on what one's life is really about, its purpose, meaning or aim. It makes one ask "Am I being fulfilled? The very rich man who comes to Jesus is looking for fulfilment and calls fulfilment "eternal life" which means the "life of the ages," the "joy of life."

"Eternal life" is a phrase used in the New Testament to signify a life filled full of meaning, of celebration, of grasping the gift of the present in such a way that the future is not to be feared unless one is found wanting in readiness to be engaged and active.

The very rich man comes to Jesus, and love in action is evident in Jesus stopping the flow of his pursuit of eternal life by what he thinks is the right way, by keeping the law and traditions of the past. The context of this story in Mark provides the clue to why Jesus must stop the chatter about eternal life and obeying the commandments.

The context is Jesus' pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the cross. Jesus is on his way to die, not for his own sake, but for the sake of the world. On his journey he calls disciples and they follow him.

This story is about Jesus calling the very rich man, one concerned with his own fulfilment, to come and die for something larger than himself and his dream of eternal life. He calls him to discipleship. Calls him to follow. "Leave the things you value. Join the mission to bring in the coming kingdom."

This is different from a mere adjustment of values or a renunciation of the pursuit of wealth. It is a call to a radical turn-around, a call to discipleship. The very rich man is called to leave all behind in order to follow Jesus. Others left family and work, he must leave his peculiar impediment – his wealth – in order to follow unimpeded.

"Eternal life," we hear from John's gospel is to "know you, the only true God, and to know Jesus Christ, the one you sent." (*C E V John 17:3*) To know the word of life, the enabling, creative word that brings into being new worlds of possibility. To die to riches, to live for the coming kingdom.

This is something other than what the very rich man man was seeking. The very rich man did not want to die to the pursuit of riches in money or success in obeying the law, the traditions, yet he knew that these pursuits were not fulfilling him, giving him the joy of life he wanted.

The coming kingdom of God is Jesus' focus and where his life is heading. So he has to speak in love, to stop the very rich man in his tracks and give him the chance to focus on the kingdom of God and not on his own fulfilment.

It is a word spoken in love, to provide this person with a chance to think about what life is about. A funeral service is like that. It stops us in our tracks. It makes us acknowledge our own mortality. It is provided in every society, culture and religion as a service of love in action.

We sing of the cross: “When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride” (*Hymn 342*). These words give us an image of love in action. We think of the cross of our own life which we bear daily. What we give our lives and energy to.

Perhaps if this hymn had been written and sung for the very rich man before he came to Jesus with his request for eternal life, he might have thought differently about his ideas of “richest gain” and loss, and poured “contempt on” his “pride.”

By the way, which of us has the hubris to claim that “I have obeyed all the commandments since I was a young man”? A favourite cartoon called “Zits” is about a young man. Friday 9th October has Jeremy apologising to his parents: “Okay! Okay! I screwed up again. But I have a good reason.” Mother says, “Which is?” Jeremy: “I’m seventeen.” Dad looks at mum and asks: “The insanity defence?” Mum says: “Well there’s plenty of evidence to support it!”

It would be some kind of unreality to boast that one has obeyed all the commandments since one’s youth and done enough to earn a prize in the kingdom. The commandment that sums up all is the call to follow Jesus in working for the increase of the love of God and neighbour. That would be a true fulfilling of the law. It is a life-consuming task, never ending.

This is what turns the very rich man away from the command of Jesus to work for the increase of the love of God and neighbour. This is a hard call to make. It demands “my soul, my life, my all” as *hymn 342* expresses it.

This story of the very rich man is the only record we have of some-one “gloomy and sad” declining the call to discipleship, to mission, to die to self and rise to live for others. He was depressed because he knew he was passing up a chance to live life “on the edge” where the incoming kingdom would lead to new beginning for self, family and others.

This result stunned the disciples, who were moved to ask “How can any one be saved?” to which Jesus answers, “There are some things that people cannot do, but God can do anything.”

Our text speaks plainly about Jesus’ encounter with the very rich man. “Jesus looked closely at the man. He liked him and said “There’s one thing you still need to do. Go, sell everything you own. Give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven. Then come with me.”

Because he loved him, he gave him a chance. Looked closely, liked and said “You have a chance to have a real life.” But Jesus could not make the decision for the very rich man.

I spoke earlier of Bonhoeffer and his decision to follow Jesus, to follow the one who calls you and bids you to “come and die.” Bonhoeffer came from a very wealthy, well-educated family and could have had a very comfortable life-style. He would have been regarded as a “very rich man.”

Instead he opted for becoming a theologian and could have safely settled in a position at Princeton University in U S A. But when he saw what was happening in Germany he decided to return to bear witness there to the need for a different kind of kingdom from the one the Nazis had planned.

His life is witness to the truth of Jesus’ pronouncement: “God can do anything.” Even a very rich man might be opened to change and become able to follow Jesus and work for the kingdom where the love of God and neighbour is first priority. Discipleship is costly. Love in action.

”Our souls are not hungry for fame, comfort, wealth or power. Those things create almost as many problems as they solve. Our souls are hungry for meaning, for the sense that we have figured out how to live so that our lives matter, so that the world will be at least a little bit different for our having passed through it.” (Harold Kushner: “*When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough*”)