

**Luke 18: 9 -30**  
**The Eye of the Needle and a Vision**  
Pentecost 21 C SSMS

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. George Stewart  
St. Stephen's Church 24 October 2010

In the name of the Father, and the Son,  
and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My wife and I have had the opportunity to visit some of the ancient cities around the world. One of the distinguishing features of many of these ancient cities is that they have a high wall built around them. The purpose of the wall is to keep out any enemies.

They all have big gates in the wall. The gates are open during the day – unless the enemy is approaching. At night the gates are closed. These gates are usually made of very thick heavy wood. It takes several men to push the gates shut or to open them.

If someone – some authorized person – comes when the gates are shut. – rather than open the big gates – there is a small door somewhere in the big gate that can be opened to let a man enter.

I know that many of you also have traveled around ancient lands, and no doubt you have seen these walled cities with their very heavy gates and the small doors cut in one of the gates.

The old part of Jerusalem is an ancient city. The old city of Jerusalem has a wall around it. It has several massive gates in the wall at various places. The biggest of these is the Damascus Gate. In that gate there is a very small door.

I didn't measure it, but if I remember correctly that little door is only a little more than a metre wide – maybe about four feet. The bottom of the door is about two feet above the ground. The top of the door is less than two metres from the ground – maybe about five feet.

One day when I was passing, I found the little door in the Damascus Gate open, so I climbed through that little door – just for the fun of it! It was a bit awkward! I had to put one foot through the opening, and then duck my head. Then squeeze my body through – then pull my second foot through.

If the traveler who came at night had a donkey, and he wanted to take the donkey in, he would have to dismount, and then persuade the donkey to go through the little door. I am sure he would have some difficulty getting the donkey to cooperate.

It would be very much harder if the late comer had a camel and tried to get it through that little door. Camels are big animals and have a mind of their own. The owner would have had to push and shove. I think it would be virtually impossible to get a camel through.

Now the interesting thing about that little door in the Damascus Gate is that it is called: "The Eye of the Needle".

That's a piece of information that you might want to store in your memory for sometime when you go to a Trivia Night.

Today's Gospel Lesson from St. Luke chapter 18, tells us about three little incidents in Jesus' life. St. Luke tells us that one day Jesus told a story about two men who went into the Temple to pray. There's nothing unusual about that.

One of them was a Pharisee. Pharisees were basically very good people. They tried so very hard to be good. They observed all the religious laws. There were hundreds of laws that had to be observed. Most of the Pharisees did their best to observe all those laws every day. Some of them were a bit proud of how well they were succeeding.

Fasting involved not only eating no food and having nothing to drink during the day. People also did not wash. They did not use any perfumes. They also went barefoot.

Most people only fasted on the special holy days. The very pious, very religious people fasted on Mondays and Thursdays of special weeks. This Pharisee fasted every week.

People were required to give a tenth of their agricultural income to God. The Tithes. This Pharisee gave a tenth of all his income. He was an excessively good man.

One day he came into the Temple. He stood in a public place where everyone could see him. He prayed a very honest prayer to God and said to God:

"Thank you God for making me so good.  
I am honest. I am not greedy. I don't commit adultery.  
I am so much better than other people.  
I am so much better than that man over there.  
I am so much more holy than he is.  
Thank you for making me so good."

The other man that came to the Temple was a tax collector. The Romans had their own system for collecting tax. They divided the country into areas. One man in each area had the responsibility of collecting the amount of tax that the Romans nominated. He could collect this money from anybody he liked, in any way he liked.

These people often used stand-over tactics. If they collected more than the Romans required – that was their profit.

Most Jewish people did not like the Romans. They certainly did not like paying taxes to the Romans. They did not like the people who collected the taxes for the Romans – and made a profit for themselves.

This tax collector came to the Temple. He stood in a corner. He bowed his head and prayed: "I am a sinner. Have pity on me."

Jesus said: "It was the wretched tax collector who was accepted by God: rather than the Pharisee."

Jesus was not commenting, on how good each person was, but he was commenting on the way that the two men approached God. One was arrogant. One was humble.

Jesus said: Those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great."

In the second incident, some people brought their children to Jesus and asked him to bless them. The disciples said: "Take the children away. Jesus is too busy with important people." Jesus said: "Let the children come to me and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these".

In the third incident a very rich man came to Jesus and asked him what he had to do to receive eternal life. Jesus said: "Obey the commandments." The rich man said: "I do. I always do."

Jesus said: there is one thing else you must do. "Sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me."

That was more than the rich man was willing to do.

Jesus made the comment: "How hard it is for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God! It is much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of the needle."

Jesus was talking about priorities – about values. What is important to God, is humility, and service to God and to others.

Let me give you another text from the Bible. The Book of Proverbs is a book of wise and witty sayings gathered over the centuries by the Hebrew people.

In chapter 29 and verse 18 of Proverbs (AV) we read: "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

A few weeks ago it was reported in the Sydney Morning Herald, that Archbishop Peter Jensen told the people of Sydney diocese – one of the largest and the richest dioceses in the world – that they were suffering from lack of vision.

Last month the Presbyterian Church of Australia elected its new Moderator-General. He is a minister who was born in western Wales, went to university there, and was ordained there. He now is minister of one of the churches in Tasmania. He has the very Welsh name of David Jones.

He told the people of the Presbyterian Church of Australia – that they were suffering from lack of a vision.

In half an hour or so, we will be meeting for our Annual Congregational Meeting. I have looked at the reports that will be presented to that meeting. I hope you have read them too.

It seems to me that these reports tell us nothing of a vision of the mission that this Congregation had during the past year, and it seems to me that it says nothing about a vision for mission during the coming year.

Proverbs says: "Where there is no vision the people perish."

I beg you – I challenge you – to develop a vision for the mission of St. Stephen's.

Some of you are rich. In fact compared to many people of central Africa, or India or any of the other third world countries, we are all very rich. Jesus told the rich man to give his wealth away and to come and follow him. When the young man was not prepared do this

Jesus commented: "It is much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of the needle."

As a Congregation, we have adopted something of a motto by claiming that we are "An oasis of Christian worship, thought and action."

Christian worship I think our formal worship on Sunday morning and at lunchtime on Wednesday is very good. Sunday morning is made so much better by the growth of the choir and by the quality of the musicians and the music that we have - and also by the liturgy.

But how important is worship to you? When you gather with your friends to give praise to God, and hear his Word read and preached - How much meaning does that give to the other activities of your week?

How deprived do you feel if you are not able to come to worship on Sunday or on Wednesday?

What can you do to make worship more meaningful – more valuable – to you?

Christian thought. We have one group that meets a couple of times a month to think about our Christian beliefs. But is this enough? Should all our people be meeting regularly to examine our thoughts as Christian people? What are we telling the people of Sydney about the meaning and the value of our faith as we go about our ordinary tasks? Do we put a lot of effort into understanding the meaning of our discipleship? What can we do that will make our discipleship more exciting?

Christian action. What do we do as a Congregation to make a difference to the ideals and actions of the City of Sydney? Are we as a Congregation busy about the business of God in the city?

Last week we saw something of the ceremony in Rome that gave Mary MacKillop the title of "Saint Mary of the Cross" because she had a vision of what life should be like for the people around her.

Some of us in this Congregation knew John Flynn. He had many contacts with us. His funeral was in this Church. Scot McPheat (one of our previous Ministers) wrote the official history of John Flynn.

John Flynn had a vision of the mission of the Church – a burning vision - to provide a "Mantle of Safety" across the inland of Australia. He spent his whole life, not only working in the Inland himself, but pressing many other people – including people such as the founder of Qantas, and the founder of Amalgamated Wireless – to work for his vision.

If he had been an associate of the Church of Rome, they might be referring to him as Saint John Flynn.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jnr said the he had a vision. “I have a dream” he said. It was a clear and urgent vision. Saint Martin?

We in this Church claim that we are the Congregation of Saint Stephen.

In the Book of Acts (chapters 6 + 7) we read that Stephen was challenged to defend his beliefs.

He preached a very long and a very fiery sermon to the High Priest and the others around him proclaiming that Jesus was God’s message to them. Stephen claimed that he had a vision “of heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God”.

Stephen is the Patron Saint of this Congregation.

What burning vision of God’s kingdom do we have – what shall we tell this city about the Son of Man who stands at the right hand of God? How will we do it?

We in this Congregation are all good people. We do good things in the community at large. We try to serve God.

But we can not come here to pray to God saying: “Thank you for making us so good – Thank you for making us so much better than other people.”

Rather near the beginning of our prayers every Sunday there is a confession that we are not perfect. We might use words such s these from an ancient prayer:

“Merciful God, our maker and our judge,  
we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed;  
We have not loved you with out whole heart,  
We have not loved our neighbour as ourselves;  
We repent and are sorry for all our sins.  
Father forgive us  
Strengthen us to love and obey you in newness of life;  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

I rather like a prayer which someone attached to the wall of the front vestry:  
“Dear Lord put your arms around me, and put your hand over my mouth.”

Now to the King of all the ages  
Immortal, invisible, the only God.  
Be honour and glory for ever and ever.