

November 28, 2021 23rd Sunday after Pentecost Luke 13
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1] There are lots of good people in the world. Indeed, most people, generally, speaking, most of the time, are decent human beings, polite to strangers and they mean us no harm. Most people are socialised, know how to relate to others, are cooperative, and are prepared to help in times of trouble. This is what is meant by goodness from the human point of view. As far as this life is concerned, this is how we get along together. Human beings are social animals; we find that life is easier through cooperation and a certain mutual self-interest

2] The holy commandments of God in the Old Testament were for this life: the Torah, the Law of the old dispensation, revealed the relationship between the Living God and the old people of Israel; it set them apart from the gentiles. It established the boundaries of moral behaviour, how they were to treat one another; how their dependence on the Lord was to be celebrated and acknowledged; the obligations they had to one another. But more than that, the Law of Moses revealed that there was more to this life than just getting by; more than merely the pursuit of our own happiness for as long as possible.

3] But that human goodness cannot be the final measure of what is of worth, what is of value, is shown up in the obvious fact that this life comes to an end. And this state of affairs comes about, as the Law of Moses revealed, because our relationships with one another, and even with the world around us, is disrupted. And that, in turn, is because we have a damaged communion with God: it is a mode of being we call Sin. As St Paul tells the Romans in an almost ironic passage about the Law, ‘What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet.”’
[Rom.7:7]

4] In the gospel today we encountered that young man from the upper echelons of Jewish society, who despite the oppressive

Roman occupation (or perhaps, because of it) has done well in the lottery of this life. I wonder how many would have looked at his riches, his comfortable way of life, his power and influence, and would have broken that tenth commandment that Paul referred to just now?

5] But for all the advantages, and no doubt, distractions that surrounded his life, the young man is a thoughtful person, unless we are to impugn him and imagine that his question to Our Lord is somehow sarcastic. Have we not met such types: people who believe in this life alone, happy to let the humble and meek search for their reward in heaven, whilst they take full advantage of all the world has to offer. But what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? (Mk.8:36) So let us give him the benefit of the doubt and regard him as, to an extent, a genuine seeker after truth.

6] He approaches Our Lord and asks a serious theological question, but he begins by assessing Christ, judging His character; he calls Him good. But this is human goodness, once again; this is goodness according to social judgement. And Our Lord corrects him, saying the only real good is found in God alone; that is the pure goodness, that utter holiness. Anything else is compromised in this world.

7] “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” he asks. Notice that he only asks about himself. It is not, what should one do to inherit eternal life; it is not what general advice can you give so that we can all enter everlasting bliss. He is very specific; he is concerned about his own salvation, and rightly so. In his particular case he has asked the right question. And the ordinary answer, the mundane response is obvious and is to be found, there, in the Law of Moses. But for him in particular there is something more he must do: he has to go beyond the conventional goodness of this world.

8] He is not commanded by Christ merely to become one of those famous philanthropists of this world, those billionaires, able to transfer vast sums of capital to where it is needed. He is, rather, commanded to detach himself from what binds him to this life, store

his wealth in heaven, instead, by giving to those in need, and to come, follow Christ. This is not some piece of political dogma of the Left; this is not trying to make this world a better place through a new economic order. This commandment of Christ is something far more radical. The word radical is from the Latin, *radix*, the 'root.' This goes to the heart of the matter, for our Lord wants to up-root him from this earth, that unencumbered, he should follow after Him. And we know where that leads, don't we; we know what following after Christ means: 'Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.' [Mk.8:34]

9] On May 13th 1940, Winston Churchill, who had newly become Prime Minister, told the House of Commons that he had nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. We teach something similar, although for a different purpose. Deny yourself, and take up your cross: what an appalling advertising slogan that would make! What advertising agency, no matter how clever, no matter how manipulative, could possibly sell such an idea? What amazes is not that Our Lord should teach this, but that so many should want to take this up!

10] There are many alternative religions, of course, in the world. Other products are available, as they like to say on the radio. There is one that defines itself as a religion of peace; another that might help you find your true self; one where you might seek enlightenment; another that will help you go in harmony with the flow. No wonder that the young man departed from Christ saddened at heart. The price was too high for him.

11] Christianity is not just church-going, but when we can have towards a thousand people coming through the doors of this church at the Paschal Vigil, why is it, then, that only a tenth of them are here this morning? Like the story of the cleansing of the lepers in the gospel, only one of the ten, and he, a samaritan outcast, comes back to give thanks. So it is here, today, that we (not otherwise constrained) return of offer the eucharist, the thanksgiving, to God. Last Sunday, Metropolitan Silouan reminded us, in general terms, what we must all do, if we are serious about seeking that eternal life in Christ: obedience to Holy Tradition, to our pastors, to the

integrity of our family life, receiving the Holy Gifts, coming to confession and, of course, fasting, in order to prepare ourselves to enter once again into the mystery of the Nativity of Christ.

12] But Sayedna's mention of Confession is of interest here, for the encounter between the penitent and his or her pastor and spiritual father is a kind of reversal of that story we heard in today's gospel. We do not come to that mystery of forgiveness listing all the commandments that we have kept carefully and wondering wherein lies our eternal salvation. We come, rather, acknowledging our failure to become that soul, that holy one, that good one, we were when first we were baptised and chrismated. Yet what the story in the gospel, and our encounter in confession have in common, is that, as with the words of Christ to the young man, so the spiritual words of counsel from our confessor are addressed to us, individually; what must we do, personally, to inherit eternal life?

13] About 240 years after that young man met Christ, another young man heard this gospel read in church. It so influenced him that he did indeed abandon his wealth and entered into the life of the desert. That was St Anthony the Great of Egypt, and he was to live about another 85 years in this world, and indeed, found eternal life through the ascetic struggle. Many, many followed him along the same path. As to our own, individual paths, we are invited by the gospel today to seek an answer.

14] In another encounter recorded by St Luke, the Pharisees ask Our Lord, when will the kingdom of God come? He answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst." [Lk.17:21] We know this mystery as Christ Himself, the One they did not recognise. For a very few in His body the Church, that life in Christ, that eternal life, the very kingdom of God, is found, like St Anthony found, in the solitude of the desert. For others, in the communal monastic life, for many here, in the communion of Christian married life: the home as an ikon of the kingdom; for others in ministry, lives of service, lives of prayer, ascetic striving, or even in their sufferings, through the cross. Yet all this we do, contradicting what this life has on offer, in order that we

may attain to the resurrection from the dead (cf. Phil.3:10-12) For by grace we are saved, as Paul tells the Ephesians today, through faith. For without faith, which of us would take up the cross of Christ?