

Sunday Homily

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

10 OCTOBER 2021

YEAR B

“As he was setting out on a journey...”

Mark 10:17

Illustration

Why is it that, however big the suitcase, there is never enough room for that last pair of shoes? Perhaps there is a scientific principle that the volume of holiday clothes expands to fill the capacity of the available suitcase – and then some! Most of us take far more luggage on holiday than we really need. At any airport, we see fellow tourists with their bulging suitcases, most of them with wheels these days for easy transfer from taxi to aeroplane to taxi. But we also see the backpackers, mainly young people, eager to do some serious travelling, to see the real world and not just the tourist hotels. When it comes to packing, the backpacker's principle is a simple one: I shall have to carry this on my journey, so do I really need it?

Gospel Teaching

Two people were setting out on a journey in today's Gospel reading: Jesus and the rich man. Jesus knew where he was going; the rich man was unaware that he was even setting out. Jesus the backpacker was travelling light, on his journey towards the cross. The rich man was setting out on a spiritual journey, a pilgrimage of discovery, as he turned away from Jesus, grieving, carrying his bulging suitcase of material possessions.

The rich man was not a bad man. He had obeyed all the commandments, and we are specifically told that Jesus, an excellent judge of character, looked at him and loved him! To the man's question about how to inherit eternal life, Jesus replies with an amazing invitation: “Follow me.” But first he must sell his possessions and give to the poor. All that stood between the rich man and a life of discipleship, all that stood between him and eternal life, was the wealth that was weighing him down. With that bulging suitcase, he would not be able to keep up with Jesus and his backpacking disciples.

Wealth itself is not evil. But it can get in the way. It is not something we need on our journey. Wealth, or the pursuit of it, can provide a focus for our lives, which should instead focus on the needs of others and a relationship with God, in the pilgrimage towards eternal life. We do not know where the rich man's spiritual journey took him, but perhaps those words from Jesus pierced his soul. Perhaps he emptied his suitcase on the way, handing out his possessions to those he

passed who had little of their own. Perhaps he followed the advice Jesus gave, and then returned to follow Jesus himself. God may have helped him through the eye of the needle.

But in the meantime, those who were already following Jesus were wondering about the things which they had given up. Peter reminds Jesus that the travelling band of disciples had left homes, families and occupations to follow him. Jesus reassures him that the rewards will far outweigh the sacrifice, but also warns that the journey will be a difficult one: there will be persecutions along the way.

Application

Those of us who are not wealthy may feel smug on reading this Gospel story. Perhaps we congratulate ourselves that it is easier for us to inherit eternal life because we are not weighed down by material possessions. But what is there in our own lives that is surplus to requirements? What can we leave out of our backpack, once we decide to abandon the suitcase and undertake some serious travelling? Following Jesus along the path to eternal life entails sacrifice on our part, the giving up of anything which prevents us from seeing the needs of others or gets in the way of a living, loving relationship with God. Ambition, pride, laziness and self-satisfaction are among the items we can remove from our packing list.

It is all too easy to feel smug as a Christian. After all, every Eucharist reminds us that Jesus has already made the ultimate sacrifice, dying for our sins on the cross. His death and resurrection have earned for us the eternal life which that rich man sought to inherit. Jesus has passed through the heavens and opened the way for us into the Father's presence. But if we seek to follow him there, let us not risk being turned away from the flight because our baggage is too heavy.