

There are passages in scripture which we simply do not understand. The cursing of the fig tree comes to mind.

Then there are some passages of scripture with which we want to argue. That's what we have today in this story about a man who claimed to be looking for eternal life but was very wealthy and refused to give up his wealth. We think we know what it is about, and yet refuse to believe it.

First of all, we think it is all about money. It is not, but it is surely about money and possessions.

We think it is all about obligation and demands, and it's not, although there are definite expectations by the end.

We are fairly certain that the man was exaggerating and hadn't really kept all the commandments that Jesus lists, but Jesus doesn't argue with him.

We want to argue that Jesus couldn't have meant the man had to give up all his possessions, but Jesus really did.

We will argue that Jesus was only speaking to rich people, who we define as all the people who have more than I do, but he isn't. Jesus is talking to us.

We think that Jesus is adding to a list of things we have to do – a new list of laws to keep, when, in fact Jesus is inviting us to trust in all that he has already done for us.

I think we get stuck because we are accustomed to using the language of obligation and hard work and getting ahead, and Jesus is using the language of love. Jesus is talking about being born into a new identity and taking on a new life.

By the end, the rich man went away grieving because he refused to sell all his possessions and gift the money to the poor. Good old St Peter is left blustering and wanting a gold star. One appears arrogant and the other hiding behind false humility....and we are left either confused or cranky.

The clue is at the center of Mark's version of this story; it is a simple statement, easily overlooked: "And Jesus looking at him, loved him." This

is a story about LOVE and then an invitation to FOLLOW. First, God's love for us in Jesus and then Jesus' invitation to follow him as a disciple.

Jesus' LOVE comes first, and is unequivocal. "Jesus looking at him loved him". Love comes first: it is a constant and stands alone, it's not dependent on the response that is coming. God in Jesus loves – first, before, during and after every human response. This is such a radical statement that the other gospel writers omit this observation: no mention of love, no grace ready to be received by the penitent.

Then Jesus offers the invitation to FOLLOW: to take to the road of discipleship where life is defined by the teaching and ministry of Jesus: not by what we do, not how much we accomplish, not who we are in this world. Jesus invites this anonymous man to FOLLOW a path which is forged by God's love for us, and not by our bank statement or work history.

We have lots of ways of evaluating our status in this world: our wealth, our reputation, our educational degrees or the number of acres we own. Jesus has only one criteria: that you are loved by the Divine Creator, YOU ARE LOVED by the obedient son. That is the only status that matters.

We hear this story and think that money is the problem and Jesus is insisting that we throw ourselves into poverty. The world demands we work like crazy to keep our heads above water and now Jesus demands we give it all away.

But what if Jesus is not demanding but inviting: inviting this man and you and me to let it go. To allow nothing to stand between you and following. Surrender your honor and power; surrender your work ethic; surrender your dependence on the world's good opinion so you can follow.

Why? Because Jesus is the Way and there is no other path that will lead you to the abundant and authentic life that can be found only in God. The world makes promises it cannot keep and in the end, the world's promises count for nothing.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about the life of Discipleship. He said 'The followers of Jesus are different. They love their enemies, pray simply, give

generously and do not judge others. They know their need for God outweighs everything.

Jesus looking at him loved him and then he said, Go, Sell all you have. Give the money to the poor. Then Come and Follow.

And we resist because every aspect of what it means to follow Jesus rankles our deeply ingrained instincts towards self-preservation and security.

We don't know the end of this man's story. Perhaps another day, he turns again and this time takes up the road of discipleship.

We DO know how it ends for Jesus – his total surrender to the cross, out of love for all God's creation, and through that cross an invitation into the life of resurrection.

Robert Frost wrote a poem many of us learned in school called the Road not Taken. I quote the end

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood and I?

I took the one less traveled by

And that has made all the difference

Jesus invites us down the road less taken, to surrender all to a cross that has gained for us the gift of authentic liberation from the constant game of winners and losers, to be embraced by love.

Where will it end for you? Jesus invites: Come and follow.