

Lord God, help us to apply the two edged sword of the word of God to our lives. Help us to listen to Jesus. Amen.

- What is your ambition in life? How you answer this may well depend on how old you are.
- If you ask someone who is at school, they may well talk about what job they would like to get, or more immediately, doing well in singing in the choir, or getting into a sports team, or if they're older, passing an exam.
 - If you ask someone who is already working, it may focus around promotion, or buying a house, or enabling your family to grow up to be whole human beings, or giving yourself a decent pension pot.
 - And for my parents who are more than 20 years further on in life's journey than I am, it focusses mainly around not falling over when walking to the greenhouse!
- For most of these, fulfilling your ambition relies on hard work, self-reliance and a certain amount of luck!
- However I suspect that many of us here today have another ambition. For a Christian, ambition is following Jesus. Ambition is attaining eternal life.
- That was certainly the ambition of the man who ran up and knelt before Jesus in today's gospel reading. He ran. That indicates urgency. He either desperately wanted to know the answer to the question he asked Jesus, or, less flatteringly, he was very busy making money *'for he had many possessions'*.
- Anyway, he *'ran up and knelt before'* Jesus, *'and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'*
- As a Jew, he believed he could reach eternal life by hard work. Keeping the commandments. He sounds as if he relied not only on himself to do this, but also upon God. He sounds like a good Jew, a man who prayed, a man who lived out his life as best he could. And it was a common Jewish belief that wealth was a sign of being blessed by God. That he was doing ok.
 - But still he clearly felt something lacking in his life. Had he missed something? Somehow he didn't feel quite as if he'd got it right. So when he discovers Jesus is in town, he finds a window in his parchment diary, runs up, and breathlessly asks the question, *'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'*
- Isn't it great that we don't have to do it by ourselves! You see, my ambition is to inherit eternal life as well. But I know I'm not as blessed as the rich man who ran up to Jesus. I know I make all sorts of mistakes. I know I do all sorts of things, and some of them on purpose, which are putting myself first, following Andrew, rather than putting Jesus first, following Jesus. I know I've got an awfully long way to go if it is all down to me. And I also know that God knows all about me. I can't hide from him. As Hebrews tells us, *'before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.'*
- Fortunately for me Christian faith reassures us that we don't have to be perfect.
 - Our first reading from Hebrews tells us that God understands our weakness, our failings, our need of support, *'we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.'* God understands!!
- The key to this in today's passage is the one word 'good'. The rich man addresses Jesus as 'good'. *"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*, and Jesus queries him. *"Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."* Yet Jesus is certainly good. Why does he pick the rich man up on his opening pleasantries?
 - Well maybe St Mark includes it because he wants to highlight the fact that *'No one is good but God alone.'* Therefore if Jesus is called good, he must God's son. And so God has come to share with us!
- Jesus loves me for who I am not for who I pretend to be! His death was the result of sinful human beings like me. He died because of me. God sent his beloved, his only Son to show just how far he is prepared to go to show that love conquers everything. And Jesus rose from the dead to prove that love really does conquer everything. Even death, the greatest divide known to God and man.
- The rich man was looking for that missing something in his life. Jesus loved him. Jesus understands. We hear *'Jesus, looking at him, loved him'* He then challenged him uncompromisingly *'and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'* But *When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.'*

- Does this mean that the rich man missed out on eternal life? I don't think so. Read the text again, because that is not what it says. It actually says the man was shocked and went away grieving.
- If you're alert you could come back at me and say, "Wait a minute it says in the very next verse, *"How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"*", and indeed that's true if we are relying on our own strength or abilities. But again, just three verses later Jesus also says, *"For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."*
- The rich man was looking for that extra something in his life. Something was missing. He couldn't put his finger on it, but his life wasn't quite complete. He wanted to feel different, more complete today. He came to Jesus looking for answers and came away dissatisfied because he didn't like the answer he heard.
 - Who knows what the rich man did after he left Jesus. How would you end the story?
- You too may be searching for that certain something. Or you may know someone else who is. Jesus is uncompromising. If you want to find true peace, don't rely on yourself. Don't rely on what you've got, put that all to one side. Give it away if you can. It'll only be a distraction. As Jesus says, *"come, follow me."*
- How is the person of whom you're thinking, going to respond to this challenge? ... How are you, going to respond to this challenge? After all it's much easier to give away someone else's wealth than it is your own!
- And this gets us to the crux of the point I'm trying to make. The rich man was trying to make a difference to how he was feeling immediately. He wanted the assurance of eternal life now. He may not even have believed in life after death. Lots of Jews didn't in Jesus' day. The Sadducees famously held this line. And like the rich man, they were the richer, more powerful group.
- But Jesus is alive, and living in the Kingdom of eternal life. And we also have received new life when we become Christian, that same new life that Jesus is living. So we are living this eternal new life now. Here on earth. Where life is far from perfect. And if we want to receive the benefits of this eternal life today, we have to live a life following Jesus, relying on him, trusting in him. Rather than relying on our own abilities or what we've got, or the influence we can pull on those around us. That's why wealth gets in the way. It's a distraction that masks the Kingdom of God. Eternal life. Because we rely on it!
- It doesn't, I believe stop Jesus's death and resurrection having power over our lives once we die and our wealth proves ultimately useless. But it does stop us receiving the benefits of eternal life now if we have not dedicated it to Jesus and given it for his disposal rather than our own. We may well go on feeling something is missing if we rely on ourselves rather than Jesus.
- It is difficult to believe that Western society is not corrupt and self-centred to its very core as we see the threat of climate change increasing, refugees turned away on borders and governments doing their level best to do what will get them reelected rather than what will be of benefit to the whole planet.
- Is our challenge now, as Christians, to give away our wealth whether than be £5 or £5 000 000? Well possibly! But it's certainly to sit lightly to it and live life generously.
- And that's to feel the cut of the two edged sword of the word of God, both the written word in the bible and the living word, Jesus Christ when the writer to the Hebrews says, *'The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.* How are you going to respond? Like the man who ran up to Jesus? Or like the disciples following Jesus? What's your ambition?
- Being a Christian, following Jesus today is about living a tightrope between the demands of the far from perfect world of which we are part, and the dreams of the Kingdom of God. And when you walk that tightrope is when you experience what eternal life feels like. And it's challenging. And it's great. And it gives meaning and direction and hope in an often hopeless world.
- If you want to receive a hundredfold now in this age. That's the challenge of how to do it. Live a life where everything is subsumed by the challenge of following Jesus. That's the challenge. Are you brave enough to apply it? What's your ambition? And how are you going to put it into practice?