

HOMILY BY DEACON GEORGE BRYAN

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28TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME.



"The only way humans have ever gone anywhere is to leave something behind." A line from the science fiction movie Interstellar, describing Newton's third law of motion. To move forward you have to leave something behind. As I reflect on the past four months of lockdown and contemplate the easing of restrictions on Monday I'm very aware of what I have left behind to move on from this pandemic. I'm also aware of the sacrifices I have made, but the things I have left behind are insignificant compared to what others have had to endure. I can't conceive the pain of having to say my final farewells to a dying loved one via a video link, without being there to hold their hand, to pray with them. Yet time and time again during this pandemic people have made these sacrifices so we as a community can move forward. So many times I have felt that I was losing control of my life during lockdown, losing simple freedoms like going for a coffee, sitting and watching the passing parade of people.

As I reflect on the things I left behind, given up in the course of the lockdown and my feeling of losing control of my life, I'm reminded of a quote from the Franciscan Monk Richard Rohr on love. Rohr writes: "The opposite of love is not hate, the opposite of love is control." I find Rohr's writing both insightful and confusing. Confusing because it challenges my preconceived notion that hate is the opposite of love. But insightful in that it causes me to reflect that to relinquish control demands great trust, a trust borne out of love.

The dialogue between Jesus and the man in today's Gospel is really about leaving things behind and subsequently relinquishing control.

I love the way the encounter starts with the man kneeling before Jesus. Clearly the man holds Jesus in great reverence kneeling and referring to Jesus as "Good Master". But, Jesus straight away unsettles the man saying nobody is good except for God. By implication Jesus is saying we are all sinners. Jesus continues; emphasising the importance of the law of Moses. The man has kept the law of Moses all his life. But then Jesus challenges the man to move beyond the law to move into the realm of love. However, to make that next step in his journey the man needs to leave behind his wealth and the security that implies. Jesus is asking the man to look beyond his current horizons and look to eternal life in heaven. I'm not sure how Kaye and I would react if someone said we should sell all our possessions and follow them. I do feel sorry for the man in Mark's Gospel because I think I would possibly behave in a similar manner. I do wish Mark had told us what happened to that man.

We then get to that memorable line from Mark: "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God." This line is interesting because it brings up lots of interesting issues and questions. Foremost in my mind is where does it leave the so called "prosperity evangelist", those who preach God loves you and wants you to be wealthy? What about those who demand a literal adherence to the Gospel?

The image was just as comforting to Jewish society in the time of Jesus where wealth was seen as a sign of God's favour. The impact of wealth being a hindrance to entering the Kingdom of Heaven so worried people in the middle ages that a legend grew that the 'Eye of a Needle' was a small gate in the Wall of Jerusalem. No such gate has ever been found. Jesus is calling on the man to give over the total control of his life to God, to become totally dependent on God.

The beautiful irony of this passage from Mark is that no matter what the man does the only way for him to achieve eternal life is to surrender his life to God. If he follows Jesus, Jesus is telling him to sell all he owns, give the money to the poor and follow Jesus. In other words Jesus is calling on the man to be totally dependent on God. If the man chooses to walk away and retain his wealth how can he be saved? This is the question the Apostles pose to Jesus. Jesus' answer points again to a total dependence on God. "For men it is impossible but not for God: because everything is possible for God." The man cannot save himself he must give over control to God. The man basically has two choices sell everything and follow Jesus or rely totally on the mercy of God. Either way Jesus is saying that the only way to eternal life is at some point in his life the man must abandon himself to God.

The choice is, there is no choice. The only way humans have ever gone anywhere is to leave something behind. In this case the only way to get to Heaven is to abandon the control of my life to God. I have to leave my ego behind, that voice that says to George: "a wonderful idea, but!" The ego is good with butts.

How is it possible for me to put Mark's message into practice. The answer is simple, yet extremely difficult. The answer is contained in the first line of the first reading from The Book of Wisdom: "I prayed, and understanding was given me". Let's look at this line "I prayed". A simple definition of prayer is wasting time with God. Each day I need to set aside some time maybe 15mins and give it over to God. I pray the psalms but any prayer will do. The thing I need to understand about prayer is, in prayer I am abandoning control to God. Because I'm leaving something behind I must be going somewhere. That somewhere is: "closer to God". The thing I need to understand is I'm not allowing God into my life, God's already in my life. In prayer I'm listening to God. Listening is crucial I need to realise that I don't have the answers but if I listen I will be given the answer. That's where the second part of that first line comes in "understanding was given me". If I listen understanding will be given to me, an understanding that will tell me what I need to leave behind in order to go somewhere. That understanding may be simply "Knowing the shortness of our life that we may be given wisdom of heart." But I need to listen to what the word of God is saying in my life. What has lockdown taught me about what's important in my life?

What do I need to leave behind to grow into eternity. This is important because: "The only way humans have ever gone anywhere is to leave something behind."