

Let's get straight into the Gospel for today:

**As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey,**

Let's pause here. A more literal translation would be:

***As Jesus was setting out on the way***

- and from chapter 8 of Mark it's clear what way Jesus is on:

It's the way of the cross; and Jesus has already made it clear

That those who would follow him on this way

Need to take up their cross, and come after him.

He's also about to make it clear that he is going to the cross

To give his life as a ransom for many –

He is about to do what is impossible for human beings:

To bring them back to a rightly-ordered life with God.

Again: **As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him,**

Let's think about the body language here.

First of all, the man runs up to Jesus:

There is an intentionality at work here; even an urgency.

The man puts aside his dignity and runs

To encounter Jesus on his way to the cross.

More than this, the man kneels before Jesus:

He puts himself in a position of humility and supplication.

Again: **As [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'**

Notice the terms of respect with which the man addresses Jesus:

'Good' and 'teacher': the man is looking for instruction,

And is hoping to receive it from one he trusts is not simply able

But is trustworthy, generous, wise.

Also, consider this: if you go back to the verses before our reading

You will find that Jesus has taught on marriage, then on children,

And now he teaches on *inheritance*.

Of course, although what Jesus says has this-worldly significance,

It is clear that he is leading those who receive his word

To enter into the kingdom where God reigns.

Jesus' response is at first disconcerting. Listen to what he says: **Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.'**

Of course, Jesus is not denying that he is indeed a good teacher,

Or, indeed, that he is God in the flesh,

But he is confronting the man with what seems to me

To be the chief question of the Gospels: who is Jesus?

As the narrative unfolds we will see that Jesus reveals his divine status

By making a call of the man's life that only God could make,

But he opens the man's eyes first of all to the man's own need

By drawing his attention to the commands of God.

Here is what Jesus goes on to say in reply to the man's question: **You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother."'**

All these commandments come from what we traditionally call

The second table of the law: those commandments

Dealing with how we treat each other in the human community.

These commandments are not necessarily unique to Judaism

Or Christianity: most human communities have rules like these,

Because without them is hard for society to function.

This can lead us to ask the question: do we keep rules like these

Because we care about God, or because we benefit from them?

Is it especially advantageous, for example, for those who have property,

To make sure that the command 'You shall not steal'

Is upheld in the human community?

Well, this is what the man says when he hears Jesus

List the rules that God has given for ordering the human community:

**He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.'**

We might at this point be tempted to accuse the man of pride,

Or at least to say that he lacks self-knowledge.

As it happens, Jesus will lead him to a deeper understanding

Of what it means to inherit God's kingdom.

But listen to what the text says: **Jesus, looking at him, loved him**

I understand that this is the only time in the Gospels

That Jesus is said to love a particular person,

So, it's significant: what Jesus is about to say in response to the man

Flows from love, and it will be for his good: **Jesus, looking at him, loved him 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.'**

Here we have a command and a call that goes beyond

What a human being could reasonably demand:

Jesus tells the man to give up his material possessions,  
To give what he has to those in need, and to follow *him*,  
*Jesus*, the only One who is good.

Now listen to how the narrative develops: **When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.**

One way to think about his shock and grief is this:

As long as keeping the commandments helped the man grow and keep  
His material possessions, then he was happy to seek the Kingdom,  
But as soon as the kingdom claimed his possessions,  
And as soon as it meant him following Jesus on the path to the cross,  
Then he was confronted with the reality of his life:  
That his possessions were what he was truly serving, and not God.

But the story does not end there: **Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were perplexed at these words.**

His disciples were perplexed:

They did not understand how Jesus could say this -  
No doubt at least partially because they had the idea,  
Not wholly mistaken, that real blessings from God,  
Including material prosperity, flowed from keeping God's commands.  
Even today a married couple that are faithful to each other  
Are more likely to be financially better off than a family  
That is broken apart because of adultery – it's how things are.

Nevertheless, Jesus does not hold back: **But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?'**

Jesus gives an image of the impossible:

A camel cannot be threaded through the eye of a needle,  
And yet even that would happen before a rich person

Could enter the kingdom of God.

No wonder the disciples are greatly astounded:

And no wonder their words also hint at an anxiety

Regarding their own status: if even those blessed by God with wealth,

If even they can't be saved, then what about those who are poor?

Who might be tempted to break the commandments just to get by?

What about everyday people like them? What hope is there?

It's here where Jesus takes the focus from what human beings can do,

And puts it squarely on to God and his power: **Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'**

Again, Jesus looks: he looks at his disciples in their perplexity,

He looks at them as they reel from his teaching,

And he reminds them that they cannot enter the kingdom of God

Except that they become like little children,

Except that they rely on God to free them from every idolatry,

Including the idolatry of wealth,

And Jesus continues of the path to the cross,

Where, as we will hear next week, he will give his life

As a ransom for many.

Indeed, Jesus was on his way: he gave up all that he had

And took the path to the cross

To ransom the souls of many, to ransom your soul.

He has done what it is not possible for us to do,

He has opened for us the way to the Father.

So let us receive his word, and the power his word has

To topple the idols in our lives.

And let us follow him to where we share in his ransom,

And so live by the Spirit that he freely gives,

The same Spirit that grows among us the fruit that will last.

In Jesus' name. Amen.