



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Reverend Peter Thompson, Vicar

## Not the Sermon You Wanted to Hear

*Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, October 10, 2021*

*The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31*

*God of all goodness, you alone are good and with you all things are possible: help us to let go of our heavy baggage, that, freed to travel lightly, we may follow without hesitation the costly path to life with you. In your name we pray. Amen.*

I've been attending Episcopal churches regularly since I was 8 years old, which means that, though I may look fairly young, I have heard more than a thousand sermons in Episcopal institutions. Over these past twenty plus years of listening to and occasionally preaching sermons, I've gotten to know the typical Episcopal audience quite a bit. I've come to understand what you like and what you don't, what kinds of statements will resonate with you and what kinds of statements will fall on deaf ears. I've learned to frame my reflections in a way you can stomach. I've figured out how to massage the Gospel message so that people like you don't run me out of town.

I can tell you, then, exactly what you want to hear from me this morning about rich people and the kingdom of God. You want me to argue that though Jesus says it is hard for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God, that is not really what he means. You want me to highlight Jesus' provocative teaching style and propose that he's just trying to make us think a bit more deeply, to keep us on our toes. You'd like me to clarify that it's the love of money that is the root of all evil, not money itself. You want me to discuss a gate in Jerusalem called the Eye of a Needle and suggest that maybe it's not all that impossible for a camel to get through the eye of a needle after all. You want me to complain about the prosperity gospel and look down on those who dare to pay attention to televangelists. Jesus' encounter with the rich man, you want me to say, is a helpful reminder that we shouldn't be greedy and that we should keep ourselves in check, and you want me to reassure you that as long as we do our best to be reasonable and sensible people who stay away from excess, we should get into the kingdom of God just fine.

About 80% of you would be more than happy with that sermon. You do not come to church, as a general rule, to be challenged. Just a few nice inspirational words, some beautiful music, and then I'd like to head to brunch—thank you very much, Pastor. But the other 20% of you want me to push harder. You more rigorous believers don't want meek and mild Christians to get off too easily. You pride yourselves on your passion for social justice. You're eager for me to point out the horrific wealth gap between the rich and the poor. You want me to contrast the homeless people sleeping on our streets with the tycoons in Park Avenue Penthouses. You'd like me to shame the Jeff Bezoses and Elon Musks of the world for living high off the hog while others suffer. You want me to quote William Barber and channel Elizabeth Warren. You want me to push for systemic change, because that is the only way in which we will ever get closer to the more just and equitable society we should have.

I can see the rationale for both sermons. I've heard each of them several times, and they each have some merit to them. It's good for us to be skeptical of scripture on occasion and to read it through the lens of reason. So much damage has been done in the world by people who quote scripture without sufficient study or consideration. It's also true that the Christian faith calls us to work towards systemic change and that scripture articulates, again and again, a concern for the well-being of those who are less fortunate. But both of these sermons, in my view, miss the main thrust of Jesus' teaching in the specific passage from the Gospel of Mark we heard this morning.

Of the two, the first sermon is the more disingenuous one. Yes, Jesus could speak in a hyperbolic manner—just two weeks ago he told us that we might need to cut off our limbs in order to avoid the pains of hell—but I suspect that, if Jesus said it was difficult for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God, his main interest was in challenging them to give up at least a large portion of their wealth, not in encouraging them to think that there were ways to get into the kingdom without making major changes to their lives. I have so often heard preachers say that, by invoking “the eye of a needle,” Jesus meant to refer to a narrow gate in Jerusalem that I previously assumed such a gate actually existed. However, I learned this week that the eye of a needle gate is a complete fabrication—albeit a ninth century one, yet a fabrication nonetheless. In fact, it seems that interpreters have sought to explain away this teaching of Jesus' for almost as long as the teaching has been circulating. The fifth century theologian Cyril of Alexandria argued that the Gospel writer intended to include the Greek word for rope rather than the Greek word for a camel. After all, it is difficult to thread a thick rope through the eye of a small sewing needle, but not nearly as impossible as it is for a thousand pound camel to make its way through the same tiny hole. Even relatively early manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark sought to alter our understanding of Jesus' teaching, changing the actual words Jesus uses for the object of his teaching from “those who have wealth” to “those who trust in riches,” and thus subtly softening the passage's quite severe implications.<sup>1</sup> It's always possible that we lack the necessary context to understand Jesus' words accurately or that the words we think are Jesus' have been corrupted, intentionally or unintentionally, over the years. But ask yourselves: is it more likely that the most straightforward interpretation of Jesus' words is inaccurate or that Christians have long been searching frantically to find ways to dismiss a particularly inconvenient teaching that Jesus proposed?

The second sermon of the two is, in my mind, somewhat more justified than the first. We all should be aware of the vast problems caused by poverty, income inequality, and the lack of a social safety net. I could see why a preacher would want to address these problems passionately and forthrightly. A variety of passages from Holy Scripture, including today's excerpt from Amos, urge us to pursue a real and lasting justice for the vulnerable poor. Jesus' encounter with the rich man, though, is not fundamentally a call to re-shape society. When we examine this section of Mark's Gospel closely, we can see that Jesus frames his critique of wealth in individual, not collective, terms. It is essential to note that Jesus does not tell the rich man to give up his possessions for the benefit of the poor because he believes that poor individuals need his wealth; Jesus tells the rich man to give up his possessions because he knows that the rich man himself is in need of giving his wealth away. Jesus' primary focus here is not on the material wellbeing of the poor but on the spiritual salvation of the rich. Jesus' explicit interest lies not in condemning the rich man for his lack of concern for others but in saving him from his own delusion that his possessions can keep him safe.

The truth is that, from Jesus' perspective, we are all rich. If you have a roof over your head or a penny in your pocket or a shirt on your back, you have something that you can give away. When we lay the blame solely on Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk and all the Park Avenue tycoons, or when we assume that the city council or the state legislature or the U.S. Congress alone can fix our problems, we misunderstand what Jesus is saying. Jesus is telling us that all of our possessions get in the way of us entering the kingdom of

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<sup>1</sup> All of these explanations are outlined in James G. Crossley's “The Damned Rich,” found in *The Expository Times* (2005), p. 399. “Most modern scholarship knows well that appealing to the gate and rope is not academically sound.”

God. The issue is not just the excesses of the very rich. As Ken Brannon emphasized in this pulpit just two weeks ago, Jesus does not advise the rich man to sell and give away the proceeds of ten percent of his possessions or even half of them. Jesus considers all of his possession fair game. He does not ask the rich man to level the playing field; he asks every last one of us to let go of it all.

Is such a teaching practical? Most certainly not. Even Jesus himself could not practice what he preached; the Gospels make clear that his disciples carried around a common purse containing the money to fund his activities. Jesus could not live a truly possession-free life any more than you or I can. His ideas are by definition beyond the understanding of human reason. And that is precisely the point of today's reading from Mark. When the disciples hear that 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 cannot believe it. They wonder if it is possible for anyone at all to be saved. No, Jesus says, it is not possible for any human being to be saved—because none of us can divorce ourselves from our stuff enough to reach the land of goodness we desire. We human beings are limited. We cannot save ourselves on our own. Our possessions, our powers, our intellects and our skills will all be of little use when the moment of real importance comes. Only God can miraculously intervene on our behalf. We are entirely reliant on God's love and grace.

I know Episcopalians very well. You have a lot of faith in your possessions, your powers, your intellects, and your skills. I'm sure this is not the sermon you wanted to hear this morning. But is it my job to give you what you want?

Amen.

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For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission  
write us at [central@stbarts.org](mailto:central@stbarts.org), call 212-378-0222, or visit [stbarts.org](http://stbarts.org)  
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022