

## Thought for the Day, 8 July 2020 Robin Fishwick (All Hallows)

Judges 15: 1-16.3 Luke 18: 15-30

### The one thing you lack

“What do you give the man with everything?” the old joke went. The answer was “Penicillin”. I’m sure I’m not alone, though, in having the experience of racking my brains to think of a gift idea for some relative who seems to have everything. Jesus, in today’s reading, encounters a man who has everything; a man with wealth and standing who has, by the standards of his peers, led an exemplary life, and yet Jesus manages to identify the thing he lacks. Tantalisingly, though, Luke never tells us in so many words what that “thing” is. Jesus tells the man what he should do if he wants to be perfect but he doesn’t give a name for that thing he lacks.

One thing is clear and that is that this is not a little thing. The man walks away dejected when he fails to do what would make him perfect in Jesus’ eyes. This is the dejection of a man that will not be consoled by the idea of still being nearly perfect. He isn’t walking off with the idea that he still has an A, even if he hasn’t got the A star he was hoping for. He hasn’t completed the whole puzzle but for one jigsaw piece - it’s more like he has found one line of his sudoku doesn’t add up and he’ll have to start the puzzle all over again.

“Why do you call me “good”? No-one is good except God alone”. Some see this as a challenge to accept Jesus’ divinity. I tend to think, rather, that it is a rebuke to a man considering himself to be holy aristocracy, who sees Jesus as a good chap like himself and by implication sees Jesus and himself as a cut above everyone else. This is not how Jesus sees things, in fact it is the opposite. Jesus has already put down his followers for stopping children being brought to them, saying there is something in the child that the adult should learn from. He has already spoken of how blessed the poor are and how imperilled the rich. But this poor fellow has come up to Jesus still expecting Jesus to be impressed with his wealth and standing. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus looks on him and loves him, Luke’s more merciless account omits this, but in neither is Jesus impressed - and in both there is pity.

Maybe Jesus doesn’t tell him what the thing is that he lacks, because he is actually giving it to him, there and then. But the thing Jesus gives him does not complete the man’s collection of blessings, it subverts it, it undermines it. A couple of seconds ago, he is blithely telling Jesus how he has kept all of God’s commandments since childhood. I always imagine him saying this with a dismissive sweep of the hand “Yes, yes, yes, yes, I’ve done all that. Now tell me the big league stuff”. But now Jesus has asked him to do something he can’t do - and not because it’s impossible, simply because *he* cannot do it because of his own personal failing. He cannot give up his wealth and status. When he realises this, he realises that his wealth is not a blessing, it is a curse. He is enslaved by it. Rather than giving him a “better standard of living” it holds him back from experiencing life in its fullness.

Luke’s account can read like an account of a smug, pompous, self righteous, over-privileged rich man who approaches Jesus all full of himself and is sent away with a flea in his ear, but I think it’s also true that Jesus did him a kindness and truly gave him the thing that he had lacked.

**Robin Fishwick**