

TFTD 23.25. Wednesday March 22

Matt 19.1-30

The secret of eternal life



“What good thing must I do to gain eternal life?” Matthew 19.16

What’s the secret? What’s the key to eternal life? — not just life that goes on and on for ever (that would be awful!), but life that has the quality of eternity, the values that last.

We’re entering the last phase of Jesus’ ministry, moving down the Jordan valley towards Jerusalem (vv.1-2). Still the crowds follow him, bringing in the sick for healing, bringing questions that need answers. But not all questions have a quick ‘n’ easy answer.

Jesus' answer to this one is in some ways brutally simple. You know the rules, he says — the ones God gave us in the Ten Commandments. You know: Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honour your father and mother, and love your neighbour as yourself (vv.18-19). These all come from the second half of the Ten Commandments, the ones that add up to what the old Prayer Book catechism called “my duty to my neighbour” (check them out in Exodus 20.12-16). The last one (from Leviticus 19.18) sums up the whole human aspect of the law: it's about loving my neighbour as myself.

Oh, that's easy, says this would-be disciple. I've kept all those. It's a bit like losing weight. Defining your targets negatively (listing the things to avoid) leaves plenty of wiggle-room. Defining them positively is much harder (and much more important): what you need is a change of lifestyle, a total restructuring of your appetites and desires.

That's what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. “Eternal life” is God's kind of life, and if we want to live like that, our target is perfection (v.21,

cf. 5.48). And that means a total commitment of mind, heart and soul, a complete reorientation from the inside out. It'll make you rethink your entire lifestyle — right down to your attitude to possessions.

And that's a step too far for this young man: he went away sorrowful (v.22). What a pity he didn't look up into the face of Jesus, instead of looking down at the ground. Like Peter did when he met Jesus by the Sea of Galilee, after the awful moment when he denied even knowing Jesus, and had to watch him being led away to be crucified. But when Peter met Jesus afterwards, he managed to look up into Jesus' face — and found forgiveness and the courage to start again.



Because when Jesus says “Follow me,” he always holds out a helping hand. He’s not just setting impossible targets: he’s offering a spiritual transformation. And with God all things are possible (v.26). That's the secret!

Eternal God, give us insight to discern your will for us, to give up what harms us, and to seek the perfection we are promised in Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

[Alternative Collect for the Third Sunday in Lent, © The Archbishops’ Council 2006]

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