



Sermon preached by Revd Chris Baker on 13th October 2024

Readings: *Matthew 7:24-28; Job 23: 1-9, 16-17; Mark 10: 17-31*

Many years ago I used to attend the May Meetings, the annual assembly of the Congregational Union, and often you would hear some splendid speeches, inspiring words, really challenging talks. There was one Church leader who I always enjoyed listening to. He had a lovely voice, he had an extensive vocabulary and a sense of drama. I loved listening to him until, one day, when he was in mid flow, I suddenly thought, this is rubbish. I don't believe a word of it. The spell was broken. I had been seduced by the sound and he never held me in thrall again. But the experience of realising that sometimes what we hear in assemblies, or even in church may not be the whole truth, or not the truth I need to hear, has stuck with me. It was a sort of rebellion.

The same thing can happen with hymns. We have some glorious hymns in our hymn books, hymns drawing on Scripture, hymns drawing on personal experience, hymn pointing us God-ward, hymns of faith and yet, now and again, I find myself asking as I sing, 'Do I believe that?'. In last month's edition of Reform Magazine Jane Bower posed some perceptive questions, one of which was, Did the crucifixion work? Now I think before we even try to answer that (and I'm not sure it is for us to seek the answer) there is the greater question, What did Jesus believe was being achieved by his death on the cross? And let me say that here is more than one theory about that. What did the early church think was happening? So we may be invited to sing a hymn based on one theology when we may in fact have a different understanding or interpretation. The result may leave us feeling uneasy, even somewhat guilty.

Now we have just sung an interesting hymn. 'How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent word'. And indeed there are firm foundations there but what is important is what is built upon those foundations. We don't want buildings of faith made of straw or sticks which can be blown away by the big bad wolf of adversity. The hymn goes on 'Fear not, I am with you, so be not dismayed' building on words in Isaiah 41 verse 10 where through his prophet God says, 'have no fear for I am with you, be not afraid, for I am your God.' There's a good foundation but Job was finding that difficult in the reading we heard earlier.

The story of Job presents us with an interesting character. Here is a man who had everything. He was enormously wealthy, he had a lovely family – seven sons and three daughters, 7000 sheep, 3000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen and 500 she-donkeys together with a large number of slaves. He actually also had a wife, but she was not listed in his blessings! He was a godly man described as the greatest man in all the East. And then it was all taken away from him, disaster upon disaster, only his wife was left and she had to come to terms with this God-fearing husband. Job had these friends who try to convince him that he must have done something bad, something very bad, for God to punish him in this way. But Job won't have it. He is convinced that he has done nothing wrong, nothing to deserve such treatment and because we have been let into the point of the story from the beginning, we know that he is right, he has done nothing wrong. He is being tested. Now, at the point where we came in on the discussion, one friend had been spelling out what he was supposed to have done wrong, and he really lays it on. 'It is because your wickedness is so great, your depravity passes all bounds. You exact pledges from your brothers leaving them stripped of their clothes and naked. You don't give water to the weary and you don't give bread to the hungry.' Widows and orphans were supposed to be protected and supported but his friend declares that Job has sent widows away with nothing and has left orphans without support. It's grim stuff and what we might deem fake news. It wasn't true, there is no evidence that Job behaved like that, but Job has got to the point where he is feeling that he can't engage with God. He can't find him. He looks this way and that and is met with a blank wall. He's feeling bitter about it. In a footnote there is a variation to the word 'bitter'. It suggests the word 'rebellious' and indeed the Good News Bible translates in just that way. It has Job saying, 'I still rebel and complain against God.'

Perhaps some of us have had those moments when we have felt rebellious, perhaps when we have been going through a bad patch and feel that God is remote, even that God isn't there. We cry out for him and feel that we are banging our heads against a brick wall. It can be devastating, it can be frustrating but many before us have known the feeling and did even Jesus experience that emotion on the cross when he cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Sometimes we need to let out our frustration but as Jesus knew and as Job in this story knew in his heart, God was there. God is there and, in a sense through our rebellion, we come to know that God is with us, in his love he will not let us go.

Sometimes, even when we seek to live the good life, even when we come to worship regularly and try to be true, we may still have those moments of dissatisfaction. We feel there has to be something more. I suggest that was the feeling haunting this very wealthy man that Mark tells us about. He had had a good upbringing, he was probably well respected, well educated, but he wasn't satisfied with life. He wasn't satisfied with his religion. We might even say that he was feeling rebellious. Without a doubt he had discussed the matter with rabbis in the synagogue, and now he comes hurrying, running to catch Jesus and ask him. 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' First Jesus warns him about calling people 'Good' however respectful that might seem and then he goes on to say, 'Look, you know what is required. You know the commandments.' To which the man says, 'Yes, I know. I know. I've kept them since I was a child, but there must be something more. Surely. Tell me.' Jesus was impressed by his sincerity, and he loved him. You can almost see Jesus putting his arm around him and saying, 'Yes. You lack one thing.' 'Tell me, what it is, please.' 'Go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.' Was that a step too far? The man was shocked, as were the disciples, as might we be, and he went away saddened because he was very wealthy. So rebellion can take us into unexpected territory. The disciples looked at one another questioning. Was it then a hopeless dream, to enter the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus was aware of their unease and said in effect, 'Look, humans can't earn their way in, can't buy their way in. It is in the hands of God alone and for him all things are possible.'

I have said before how I find the writings of Jonathan Sacks, who had been the Chief Rabbi of Britain and the Commonwealth, very stimulating. At the conclusion of his book 'To Heal a Fractured World' he lists some things which he has learned. He makes no special claims to wisdom but offers various thoughts. For example, he writes 'that it is not the most wealthy or powerful or successful or self-important which make the greatest difference or engender the greatest lovethat those who give to others are the closest we come to meeting the divine presence in this short life on earth.' He also suggests that religions reach their highest levels when they stop worrying about people's souls and care, instead, for the needs of their bodies. You feel like putting in brackets after that – (Discuss).

It could be argued that that man who came with his pressing question for Jesus might have found the structure of his religion to be restrictive, that somehow it had not given him the freedom or confidence to develop his faith. Centuries later we see this in the story of our churchmanship. The story, set out so effectively by David Cornish in his book *Under God's Good Hand* tells of the effect of dissent as people sought the right to order their own lives and worship under the gospel. Nonconformity is by definition rebellion and the path was often painful and dangerous. Some ministers and lay folk did indeed lose all their possessions, their homes and even their lives and that is part of our history. At the time there were those who worried that rebellion might turn into revolution but that didn't happen but later, as David nicely says, the new wine of Methodism was to burst the wine skin of the Church of England.

Today, I suggest, we are still in the mood for rebellion but this time it is a rebellion against the hedonism of the world. I find television adverts fascinating. There are some I do not understand. Many I do not remember, but one or two stick in the mind. Take, for example, the advert for a certain cruise line. It is aimed at the well-educated, well to do watcher. We are presented with a quote from Alan Watts and it goes,

I wonder, I wonder what you would do if you had the power to dream any dream you wanted to dream. And it continues You would, I suppose start out by fulfilling all your wishes, love affairs,

banquets, wonderful journeys, music beyond belief... Actually that's a mish-mash of the original but the damage has been done. It is an astonishing, self-satisfied list of dreams and, I suggest, quite unreal for most of us. You may be surprised to know that love affairs would not be top of my list, and neither would be banquets, nor indeed any of the other things listed. But the quote goes on to suggest that after a while we would forget that we were dreaming. Presumably the dreams become reality. It is building a world on false foundations, of false expectations; a world of straw or sticks which could be destroyed so easily. Would that we and all people might come to Jesus with a dream, a dream in which no one goes hungry or thirsty, in which there is an end to hatred and violence, a dream which seeks the good of our neighbour of whatever race or colour or sexuality they may be. And perhaps, perhaps after a while we would forget that we were dreaming...

We are called to rebel, not against God but against the false gods of this world. We are called to dream, not selfishly, but for the sake of the world and may the dream of the kingdom become a reality among us.