

Pentecost XX  
10/10/21  
Eltham

**Readings**

**OT: Job**

**Psalm: 22 first half**

**Epistle: Hebrews 4:12-16 great high priest who understands**

**Gospel: Mark 10:17-31**

+FSHS

It was the moment I looked up into his eyes that I was lost. The gentle hand with calloused fingertips cradling my cheek. The smile, and the tenderness the creases at the corners of his eyes expressed.

I barely heard his words.

How could he know me so, in a single glance? It was as though he saw to the depths of my soul, saw my desperate striving, saw my heart and knew me. And in that vulnerable connection – I, I too knew him – and was lost.

To be honest, I'm not sure how I came to be in that town on the same day as him. I'd heard the stories, of course: the wandering preacher and his band of misfit followers, who'd traipsed the Decapolis with words to delight the commonfolk and disturb those in power, and who was known for healing those with no hope, unafraid of touching the untouchable. I was passing through, had stayed the night in a townhouse owned by the family, on my way to complete some business dealings further north and check in with the managers of one of our estates.

All my life I've longed and searched for something beyond my capacity to name. Some might call it the elixir of life, immortality – but it's not quite that. More like a sense of something on the edge of apprehension but just about of view, hinted at through the flowing words of psalms, and teased in the laws of Moses. As a child I was diligent and assiduous in my studies of Torah, to the point my father and brothers sometimes ridiculed me with the accusation that I'd rather be a scholar, maybe even a Pharisee, rather than the heir to my family's holdings, the one being trained from birth to manage and oversee the affairs of wealth and state. So I complied as the dutiful son, and learned my father's

craft. And wished I had been the second or third son so that I could devote my energy and my whole being to my quest.

Life is short and brutal. Raised in comfort I may have been, but one doesn't succeed to leadership of a family without knowing something about life: the squalor of slaves, the stench of the stale sweat of workers in summer, the blood and gore, betrayal and mistrust and every sordid scandal in the tussle for power. I saw all this and thought: how meaningless. How meaningless the short span of our lives haunted by death from first breath to last. How meaningless wealth and poverty, health and illness. How meaningless. What is the purpose of life, the purpose of living, the one thing for which it is worthwhile to give one's energy and all? My answer was in my longing for that which did not have a name but called to my whole being.

Who hadn't heard of the Teacher? More to the point, why did I not hear the gossip the previous evening? It wasn't as though I was a stranger to the noise of talk around me – the news that he was here, passing through as he travelled south. Why did I not hear of it til the morning? I still can't explain what compelled me to rise, hurriedly perform perfunctory ablutions and then race half dressed to the place where he was staying, desperate to catch him before he left. I arrived just as he was putting something in a bag a disciple was waiting to hoist onto his back.

The morning sun was peeking above the horizon, not yet high enough to warm the colours of dawn in which the sky was painted. But to me it was as though the morning star had fallen and stood before me. I fell to my knees, overwhelmed by his brightness.

What could I say to him? I knew he was a teacher. But how to address his brilliance?

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

It caught his attention, but not for the reason I thought it might. It unsettled him. “Why do you call me good? Only God is good.”

That was true. But so was the essence of who he was, which I had named good. It radiated from him, enough to smite one in the chest with its reality. How could he not know the effect he had? How could others not know this and respond?

There was a pause. I wasn't looking at him, instead noting his worn sandals, the curl of his toes, the hem of his robe shifting in the breeze, the call of a bird, the distant lowing of cattle waiting to be milked, the sounds of the town coming awake to face the day. Around us the disciples continued preparing to leave.

"You know the commandments."

"They've been written on my heart all my life," I said softly. "All my life."

And then I looked up, willing him to understand, longing for one to see the deepest longings of my being. He reached towards me, an astonishingly unexpected gesture. And he *saw* me, as I *saw* him; knew me, and I was known.

Tears welled up from the depth of my soul. This, *this* was my answer. He brushed a droplet away with a thumb and released my face, but not my attention. Never, for in that steady gaze I found the imprint of that which defies description but which fills all things, and for a moment I was held in the mystery of being and found the beating heart of everything – his beating heart, mine – to be love.

"There is one thing you lack," he said kindly, warmly, though it had an uncompromising edge. He reached for me again, grabbing my elbow and drawing me up to stand with him. "Go, sell everything you have, give it all away, and then come follow me."

If I had not been the heir and responsible, nothing would have stood in my way of doing just that on the very spot. I have failed him, these long years, for while I'd willing give away what belonged to me personally, how could I sell out from under them that which supported my family, my household, and with it several local economies?

They told me later that he'd commented to his disciples how hard it was for the rich to enter heaven, how dismayed they were, exclaiming, "Well, where's the line of wealth drawn? Doesn't that exclude

basically everyone?” They told me he’d said in reply that no one who gave up family, fame, wealth in this life to follow him would lack these things. They told me he said, “the last shall be first and the first last.”

I weep when I remember the way he looked at me, when I think of how I’ve failed him, how I lacked the courage to give all for the sake of the pearl of great price. He offered me a place at his side, offered me the mortifying ordeal of being known, and knowing with unveiled face. I had the answer in front of me – but couldn’t bear it, couldn’t hold the morning star.

I hope that when my last breath comes at the end of this meaningless life, I will again see his eyes, his smile, feel that hand on my cheek. And I will say to him: forgive me, I wanted to follow but couldn’t. I freed my slaves and instead looked for all those no one else would employ to come work for me. I changed my business practices to put the least and the little ones first. I offered a home to orphans and widows. I made sure every member of my family had enough, and gave away all profit beyond what we needed to live. Where I heard of your disciples being imprisoned, I offered bail and tended their wounds and gave enough for them to flee to safety. I never pass the poor or the weak, the sick, the elderly without sitting to hear their story and offer a cup of water, thinking of you. And I will say, I saw you reflected in their eyes, in their hands, their lives. I looked for you in all the little ones so I could put them first.

I hope he will look at me and love me still, in spite of my failures, and forgive me, and raise me up by the elbow once again to stand with him.