

**From the sermon given at St Paul's Harold Hill  
Sunday 25 September 2011**

“Jesus looked steadily at him and he loved him” (Mark 10. 21). This, for me, is one of the most moving verses in the whole Bible. A rich young man comes to Jesus asking what he must do to gain eternal life. Jesus tells him that he must keep God’s commandments, but the young man says that he already does this. “In which case” says Jesus, “Sell all that you have, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow me. In this way you will have treasure in heaven”. But he can’t do this. Shocked by what Jesus has said, he walks away grieving, tied down by his wealth and possessions.

This is a hard story. For, despite the cutbacks and recession, and compared to those who struggle to survive in East Africa, most of us live with unimaginable wealth. Does coming to church mean giving all of that up? Well, some today are still called to this vocation of complete poverty and simplicity of life, but what it means for most of us is that the whole of our life, including our wealth and possessions, needs to be examined in the light of God’s call to follow Jesus and live like him. To follow Jesus, to be part of his church, means to live a different sort of life.

Now this is probably not the message you were hoping to hear on Back to Church Sunday. You were probably holding out for something a little more cheerful. Indeed, you might now be feeling exactly like that rich young man and having come once, may never come again. It all seems rather hard, and walking away the most sensible option. But in Mark’s account of this story, as the rich young man rejects what Jesus challenges him to do it says this: he looked steadily at him and he loved him. In other words Jesus loved him, and carried on loving him, even as he walked away.

I want you to know that God loves you and goes on loving you whether you come to church or not. To get God to love you is not the object of the exercise. As St Paul makes clear in his letter to the church in Rome, there is nothing you can do that will separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus (see Romans 8. 31-39). No. The reason we come to church is not so that God might love us, but that we might learn to love God and that we might learn to live God’s way; not just us, but all the world. So if you are here for the first time, or for the first time for a long time, welcome. Please don’t walk away. Because God is all merciful and all loving, and the rest of us are here, not because we are so good or so faithful or so generous, but because we are also learners in the school of God’s love, trying to find out how we can best respond to the challenges of Jesus, and knowing that whatever we do, or don’t do, he goes on loving us.

*+Stephen Chelmsford*