

The meetings that Jesus has with individuals in the gospels often have a lot to tell us. Our gospel reading today has a very striking encounter, between Jesus and a man who was rich and, according to one of the gospels, young. But I want to begin by looking at another conversation which Jesus had - which seems at first similar but actually is very different. This is a story which we looked at during our time on Iona, guided by our leader Padraig.

In this second meeting it's a teacher of the law who comes to speak to Jesus. Luke tells us that he comes to test Jesus - to try to trap him. He asks Jesus almost exactly the same question: 'Teacher' he says 'what must I do to inherit eternal life'. There's one difference - in our story the man says 'Good teacher'. In the light of what follows, this seems like genuine respect - he isn't trying to trick the new upstart rabbi.

But in the other story Jesus seems to know the game that's being played, and he throws the question back at the lawyer. 'What do the scriptures say' he asks. How do you read them? The lawyer quotes what we call the two great commandments - love God, and love your neighbour. That's it, says Jesus (with a twinkle, I suspect) - if you do that, you will live.

And then we hear the real reason for the lawyer's question. The man, **wanting to justify himself**, asked 'who is my neighbour?' Jesus responds with one of the most famous

parables - the Good Samaritan. He ends by asking 'who was the neighbour to the man who was robbed'. Padraig imagined the lawyer doing a good impression of a 7 year old as he says 'the one who showed him mercy. I suppose!' Jesus says - you go and do the same.

It's a conversation with an edge - like quite a lot of the encounters Jesus has. Someone is trying to catch him out, and he ends up turning the tables and making his questioner feel that they have been tested instead, tested and found wanting.

So is our gospel story this morning like that? A challenging encounter aimed at sending away the questioner with his motives exposed and his own life questioned? I don't think it is quite like that.

We've already had a clue - the man calls Jesus good, apparently without irony. Jesus won't accept the compliment - he is always wary of the titles others give to him. He goes on to say to the man 'You know the commandments... you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness.' It's a standard list, and the man is able to say - again truthfully it appears - 'Teacher, I've kept all these since my youth'.

And then something happens that doesn't happen in any other encounter with Jesus in the gospels. Jesus, looking

on him, loved him. Another translation says, 'Jesus looked straight at him, with love.'

How do you imagine that look? The young man, sincere, eager, really wanting to know what else he must do - and Jesus, seeing his desire - responding to his openness - loving him for who he is.

So you might think it is surprising that what Jesus then gives him is a challenge even greater than the one he gives the lawyer in the other story. He says, 'You lack one thing - you need only one thing. Go and sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.'

It's a pretty difficult answer to hear. The man's face falls, and he goes away grieving, because he has many possessions.

Why is Jesus so demanding? Surely the young man could just have joined the disciples? Why make it so difficult?

I think the clue is in the love that Jesus has for this man. Because he sees how good his heart is - because he loves him for his eagerness - Jesus wants him to have more. It isn't that he wants to take something away from this man - he really wants to give him something. This man may be rich - he may own a lot of things - but Jesus points out to him his lack - his need. He cannot receive all the good

things that God wants for him - the treasure that will come from really opening his heart to God and walking with Jesus. If he only did then, like the disciples, he would discover that what he receives will be far more than what he gives us.

There's a DVD I have by Rob Bells which tells a story about his young son, out on the beach one day with his family. Wandering along the beach, he scoops up lots of the broken shells lying there. And then, out in the sea, he sees something wonderful - a starfish floating on the waves. The boy rushes out into the sea, to get the starfish. And then he turns back. He goes out again - and turns around again. His family urge him on - 'Go and get the starfish - that's your starfish' but he just stands there in the waves, crying. 'What's up?' says his Dad - 'Why don't you get the starfish?' The boy turns back, and sobs 'Because my hands are filled with shells'.

We often fill our hands - and our lives - with things that seem important, but which actually stop us receiving what is most life giving. There are plenty of ways our time can be swallowed by what has no lasting value - plenty of ways our attention can be focussed on things that bring us no deep joy - saving money, spending money, having a good time, being overly dutiful, whatever our particular distraction or escape is. It's very easy for our heads and our lives to be so full that there's very little space for the things that really give us life.

What might those things be - the things that give us life? Sometimes it is simply having space to be - to look out of the window properly and rejoice in what we see - or to have a conversation with a friend or a stranger - or to have real space to linger in God's company. Sometimes what really gives us life will be challenging - giving ourselves to some activity, opening up to other people, being ready to follow a new direction. If we take time to reflect, we can often begin to see what it is that is most life-giving for us, and sadly also, the ways in which we fail to be fully open to this.

The man in the story went away full of sadness. And I imagine Jesus turning away full of sadness as well - saying with real anguish 'How hard it is for those who are rich to enter the kingdom of God'.

This particular man had a particular issue - his wealth. But that look of love - isn't that how Jesus looks at each of us? When we bring him the stumbling offer of our lives he looks at us, and he loves us. And for each of us he has a longing. When we love someone we often have a longing for them. If we know them well we may be aware that they are somehow unhappy, or trapped, or that they could get so much more out of life. And then we long for them to see what they need to see, and to do what they need to do.

That's the longing that Jesus has for us - the longing that comes from love. And it will be different for each of us. I wonder, if we imagine Jesus standing before us - you may

even like to close your eyes - if we imagine him looking straight at us - looking at us with that love which is gentle and accepting, but also full of passionate longing for us to be fully who we can be, for us to receive all that God has for us - I wonder what he might say to us? I wonder if there is something that prevents us from fully responding to his deepest invitation - something we might need to let go of, so that our hands and our heart are able to receive? I wonder what it is that Jesus says to you - and to me - in the stillness of our hearts - because he loves us?

Perhaps we can begin to hear what he says, but we are afraid to listen. We are afraid of what we might hear, in case it is too difficult. We have too much to lose. But, says Jesus, God has so much to give you. And it isn't all down to you. It may be hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven - it may be hard for you to be fully open to what God has for you - but all things are possible for God. We can trust in the longing God has for us. That is enough.

The poet, T.S. Eliot talks about a 'a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything'. Jesus longed that the young man might be set free to know the joy of this simplicity. Although there would be a cost, it was only so that Jesus could give something to him of much greater value, because he loved him. I wonder what it is that Jesus most wants to give to us, if only we will let him, because he loves us.