

In today's reading, Jesus said that it is very difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. It was so difficult that it was easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of the needle.

Astonished, the disciples wondered out loud, "Then who can be saved?"

What Jesus said was a shocking thing, because the pervasive belief was that the material wealth was the sign of God's blessing—a belief that is still popular today. Now Jesus turned this sign of God's blessing into a burden, an obstruction, or a liability, to one's own salvation. Then Jesus said that those who left their families and wealth for Jesus' sake and for the gospel would receive a hundredfold back now in this time.

Any way you cut it, a hundredfold of return is a phenomenal result for any investment. So why haven't the people cast away in droves their family members, jobs, and property for the sake of Jesus and the gospel?

There are two things that go against such a motivation. First, those who have given up their lives, in order to follow Jesus, do not care for the worldly possessions—a hundredfold or not. Secondly, those who care enough about the worldly possessions to covet the hundredfold return would not dare surrender their present wealth. They are smart enough to know such a windfall does not happen. Maybe that is why the media pastors become rich by writing the books that say "God wants you to be rich," and the less smart ones buy their books, and wait for the windfall to plop down from heaven.

Even if Jesus is capable of handing out such rewards, such rewards are not consistent with the spiritual pursuit. The reward of the spiritual pursuit is spiritual in its nature. The reward of the materialistic pursuit is materialistic in its nature. If this were not true, the wealthiest person should be the most spiritual person. The reality is quite otherwise, as we know.

Does this make sense: Jesus says a rich man cannot stay rich, while the poor shed what little they have, and become 100 times rich. Now do these newly-minted, rich people get to keep their newly acquired hundredfold riches? Since they are rich now, don't they need to sell all they have and give to the poor? You cannot find the sillier teaching anywhere.

Therefore, whatever Jesus said at the time had to refer to the reward that is spiritual in its nature. If we allow that Jesus' followers were not really well-versed in his metaphysical teachings, we would see that his followers had difficulty understanding any reward other than materialistic in its nature. Jesus listed the rewards in terms that made sense to the simple people. For example: "the treasure in heaven" would be understood by anyone.

Some argue that it was the misspelling of the Greek word for "rope" rendered the word to be translated as "camel." It

sounds like a more fitting aphorism, to compare a rope to a needle than a camel to a needle. Others commented that the eye of the needle was a small opening on the main gate of the rampart, reserved for the foot traffic. The similar idea was used by the defenders of the ancient castles, as well. They often made the entrances small, so that the enemy could send in only a single file of the soldiers, once the gate is breached. The marauders could not storm the castle that way.

The camel was the pickup truck of the time, and it carried the goods. The imagery Jesus used probably evoked the frantic and comical scene in which the merchants scramble to unload the goods, hand-carry the goods in, and pull the camel through the man-sized opening.

Whether it was a camel, or a thick rope, the imagery is unmistakable: there is this sense of abject impossibility for the rich who will have a great difficulty entering the kingdom

of God. Nevertheless, the imagery of a camel and "the eye of the needle" creates a beautiful illustration. The rich own a lot of stuff, and in order to enter the kingdom of God—in order to walk through the eye of the needle—the rich need to unload their burden.

A man felt like smoking a cigar, while riding in the back seat of his limo. He rolled down the window half way, and lit the fat one. When the signal light turned red, a homeless guy walked up to the window, and asked for a change. The man in the limo told the poor guy: "My man, who carries cash nowadays? I've got my money buried in portfolios and overseas accounts."

People think they are not rich, because they find themselves short of cash. They know they can always use more cash. Funny, even the beggars think exactly the same way as the rich do: the beggars could use more money, too! But there are things that set the rich apart from the

poor: if you have investments that allow you to retire comfortably, if own a real estate, if you can go on a lengthy vacation at your convenience, if you have the surplus income to burn, and if you have anything that you can convert into large sums of cash, then, you may not be exactly poor. You may not be the super-rich, but you've got to be closer to the rich than the poor.

This puts a Christian believer in a bind. Does it mean that I have to give up all I have and give it to the poor? A cool head would ask, instead: If I sold all I have and gave it to the poor, would it leave the poor in the better shape or the worse shape? If I kept my business instead, and created jobs for the poor, wouldn't it be better? If I gave away all I had, what kind of shape would I be in? Is it a wise thing to give away cash to the poor? Wouldn't it be better to give out micro loans, instead?

Rather than take reactionary offense to Jesus' teaching, why don't we think about the point

that Jesus makes? Because our heart is where the treasure is, it is fitting for us to ask what occupies the center of our hearts. What Jesus did to the rich man was make him look into his own heart, and acknowledge what occupied the center of his being. Jesus' answer did not solve his problem. It instead clarified the choices: for the rich man, his religion was a side show; his possession was the main event.

For some people, selling one's possessions and giving them away may be the ticket to eternal life, as in the case of this rich man. For others, it may not be.

A man visited the Outback of Australia. He set out to hike the barren land. He somehow lost his way, and wandered in the wilderness. After more than a week, the authorities began the search. The man was thirsty, famished, exhausted, and sunburned. The searchers were able to find him finally, because they just followed the trail of personal items dropped on the ground.

As he wandered, the man discarded contents of the backpack, and, in the end, the pack itself. The last thing he carried, as the search party found out, was a thick copy of the Bible. When the searchers found him, he was severely dehydrated, and lost a lot of weight. One of the searchers asked him, "How are you?" The man replied, "I'm hungry."

The man was interviewed later, when he returned to the States. By this time he put all his weight back on. When asked why he carried the Bible with him, the man said that he carried the Bible, because it was the Word of God that sustained him.

As the man wandered, the man discarded his possessions one by one. As the days went on, things that he carried became burdens. Since he held onto it the longest, maybe we can give that the man actually believed that his Bible was central to his survival. In the end, however, even the Word of God, the Bible, became a burden. What was actually central to his

being was made so obvious when he was rescued, by the first thing that came out of his mouth: "I'm hungry."

If we search our own heart, we come to know what is at its center. And in its center is the treasure of our hearts. Jesus gave the rich man a straight forward answer, so that the rich man may see what is at the center of his being. It was painful to encounter and acknowledge what was at the center, because the man had been deluding himself all his life that he was a God-loving, law-observing, righteous man. But Jesus "lovingly" ripped the delusion off his eyes, and helped him acknowledge that which the man actually treasured at the center of his heart.

For the lost man in the Outback, it was a long and painful process to shed the personal items one by one, under the desert sun. That process of shedding could have helped him encounter his true self. The modern amenities, wealth, and status become part of one's identity over time, and they

cover up the true identity of a person. It could have been an enlightening experience for the man.

It takes a wilderness experience to be stripped forcefully of all the amenities and protection, in order to see clearly and authentically what actually occupies the center of one's naked being. The man might have believed that the Word of God was at the center of his being: carrying the thick copy of the Bible symbolically confirmed his belief. But in reality, it was a superstition. In the painful end, the Bible was nothing more than a burdensome talisman that failed to save him.

For the rich man who ran up to Jesus, seeking the eternal life seemed at the center of his heart. Then he realized his religion was second to his possessions, as he turned away. His religion so far helped him mask the conflict with his possessions. Now the delusion was stripped away, he saw the reality, and it saddened him.

Of all things that could have occupied his mind, while lost in the Australian wilderness, food was the only thing that mattered to the man. Food was the treasure of his heart. That painful experience of being lost in the Outback could have opened his eyes. But I doubt it did.

It takes a wilderness experience to find out authentically what we actually keep at the center of our hearts. Even Jesus had to go through that desert experience himself, in order to find out who he actually was, before he entered his ministry—for forty days and forty nights, just to make sure there were no delusions.

What we keep at the center of our hearts may turn out to be something else than we would like to believe. It may turn out, disappointingly, to be such mundane and shallow things as money, food, etc. Don't we like to think that we are spiritual and profound?

On the other hand, what we find at the center may not be something that one can sell off, such as possessions. It could turn out to be something that one cannot unload at all: it could be a narcissistic view of self; it could be the uncompromising selfishness. Nevertheless, it may turn out to be the obstruction to one's entry into eternal life.

Our heart is where our treasure is. But the treasure we keep is not necessarily the treasure that is true. If we search our hearts, we will locate our treasures. The true treasure is something that no money can buy. The true possession is something that no one can forcefully take away. The true wealth is something that remains even when everything has been taken away. The true riches are something that last, even when everything has been given away.