13TH SUNDAY OF LUKE
November 28

THE GOSPEL READING
Luke 18:18-27

At that time, a ruler came to Jesus and asked him, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’ ” And he said, “All these I have observed from my youth.” And when Jesus heard it, he said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” But when he heard this he became sad, for he was very rich. Jesus looking at him said, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” But he said, “What is impossible with men is possible with God.”

THE SERMON

The story of the rich young ruler appears in the middle of two other stories which teach complete dependency upon Christ. In the preceding passage, Christ invites the children to come to Him while teaching his Apostles that the kingdom of heaven will be received by those who become like children, i.e., those who come to Him in love
and complete trust. In the passage following the story of the rich young ruler, we read that the Apostles had left everything to follow Christ, and in that sense, they became like children, completely reliant on the Lord. The story of the rich young ruler appears between the two, giving further light in the Lord’s teaching about discipleship: we ought to desire one thing above all things, Christ Himself – and give ourselves completely to Him.

The rich young man was a ruler, i.e., a religious leader, a member of the Jewish religious leadership. As such, like his peers, he was investigating who this Teacher was, who was going about doing miracles and preaching about eternal life; and he comes to Jesus and says, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” This is the most important question one can ask, for to inherit eternal life is the human hope par excellence. He approaches Jesus not to test Him but out of the desire to find the way to Salvation. He is a faithful young man and his heart burns to please God, to find eternal life. Only God is good; and the rich young ruler was asking God the Son Himself, who is the Source of goodness, what one must do to inherit eternal life. And the answer is that eternal life is found by following the Lord Jesus in complete dependence.

A child needs a provider, but the rich young ruler was completely self-sufficient. A child relies on their parents, but he relied on his wealth and his virtues. In other words, a self-reliant mindset and a desire for things of this world is precisely the condition that makes us unlike children, and therefore far from the Kingdom of God. The Lord calls us not to worry about our life, what we will eat or drink; nor about our body, what we will wear, for our Father knows the things we need before we ask Him. Rather, we are to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to us (Matthew 6:33). Jesus calls the rich young ruler, reliant on his wealth and virtue – “all these I have observed from my youth” – to do the one thing that was keeping him from following Christ. Jesus looking at him, loved him (Mark 10:21) and said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

Jesus’ call to the young ruler gets at the root of the issue in his life. God knows us individually, and because of His love for us, He gives us the specific prescription which grants us healing, so we can be truly united to Him. The Saints imitate God in this respect also: e.g., when counseling a rich man, Saint Kosmas Aitolos did not ask him to give alms to the poor (which would have been very easy for him), but to fast (since he had to deny himself and keep from the gourmet food readily available to him); by contrast, when counseling a poor man, he did not ask him to fast (which was easy for him in his usual lack of food), but to give alms out of his poverty. In His love for us as individuals, God always gives us the medicine we need. The rich young ruler was self-sufficient, and Christ was calling him to become like a child and to desire nothing but the Lord himself, and to trust him fully.
Sometimes when we are pleased with our accomplishments, especially with the notion that we are keeping the commandments, that we are “good Christians,” and we may even think that we have a right to salvation. However, it is relatively easy to follow rules; but rules and commandments do not in themselves grant us the Kingdom of God. Only childlike trust in Christ, utter dependence on Him, and selfless love for Him and others can bring us to the Kingdom. The Lord knew that this young man was following the commandments of the Old Testament. He knew that he desired more, but there was one thing that kept him away from the perfect way of serving God. He could not give himself completely to God yet because he also desired his riches very much. And yet, the Lord is full of mercy, love, and compassion for him. He knows that not only this young man but everyone can be saved – and that is what the Lord desires. Jesus teaches us that, although we are all struggling daily with worldly matters we must give everything to God, including our struggles, hence the saying, “Let go and let God.”

All the Saints gave up their lives for the love of God. Martyrs were not afraid to die rather than deny their faith in Christ. Monastics left riches, family, friends, and every worldly bond behind to dedicate themselves to the teachings of the Gospel. Holy Hierarchs and priests lived to offer the Holy Sacraments and spread the good news of a loving God for the salvation of this world. Holy women taught the Gospel with their exemplary lives. All those were human beings like the young ruler and like us. They struggled and redirected their desires to Christ. They did not turn their back to the One who took upon Himself the sins of the world. God was their absolute priority. This point is not really whether someone has riches, but the question to all of us is, what do we ultimately rely upon? What is our true treasure, our true love? What do we desire above all, what is our absolute priority?

Saint Cyril says, “he who gives up all worldly and carnal things will gain for himself far greater things, inasmuch as the Apostles, after leaving a few things, obtained the manifold gifts of grace, and were accounted great everywhere. We then shall be like to them.” The image of a camel going through the eye of the needle is a simple analogy of impossibility. Apart from the love and grace of God, we cannot find eternal life, whether we are rich or poor because when we love things – anything – more than the God who loves us, we live selfishly and we close ourselves off to Him.

Saint Basil the Great says, “He does not tell us to sell our goods, because they are by nature evil, for then they would not be God’s creatures; He therefore does not bid us cast them away as if they were bad but distribute them; nor is anyone condemned for possessing them, but for abusing them. And thus it is, that to lay out our goods according to God’s command both blots out sins, and bestows the kingdom.” What is impossible with man is possible with God – because this is the will of the God who loves us and has redeemed us.
We are struggling for a better life on earth, and this is not a sin. But it is not enough. We must completely give ourselves to Christ, to the Gospel, and one another. We must put ourselves and all our desires, all our anxieties, all our concerns in His divine hands and let Him lead us on our path to salvation. The Lord loves us without reservation and He has already freed us from the bondage of sin and death. However, our response to His love requires honest repentance, complete devotion, and loving discipleship. We need to reorient our hearts and our whole lives to follow Him who is Love; in this way, we will become like “children of the resurrection” (Luke 20:36) and put our reliance and hope completely in Christ, which is the path of joy and peace that brings us to the Kingdom of God.