

Kingdom entry

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[0 : 00] Today's reading is from Luke chapter 18, verses 15 to 34, which can be found on page 1057 of the Church Bible.

That's page 1057. Now they were bringing even infants to him, that he might touch them, and when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them.

But Jesus called them to him, saying, Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.

And a ruler asked him, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus said to him, Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

You know the commandments. Do not commit adultery. Do not murder. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Honor your father and mother. And he said, All these things I have kept from my youth.

[1 : 07] When Jesus heard this, he said to him, One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have, and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.

And come follow me. But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, How difficult it is for those who have wealth 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 person 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. And Peter said, See, we have left our homes and followed you. And he said to them, Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many more times in this time and in the age to come eternal life.

And taking the twelve, he said to them, See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished.

[2 : 30] For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spat upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.

But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said. Well, thank you so much for reading. It really is an enormous pleasure to be back here.

A friend of mine has recently come back from Ghana. He sent me a link to the service he'd attended in the cathedral, where the preacher had spent over ten minutes in greetings as he began.

He announced that he actually had another appointment to go to, and therefore was disappointed he couldn't spend longer greeting everybody. And I sort of feel rather like that preacher, but I've done the greetings.

Let's pray, and we'll get into what we're looking at this morning. The unfolding of your word brings light and gives understanding to the simple.

[3 : 36] We come to you in our simplicity, Father, knowing we know nothing of you unless you show us. And we pray that you would light up. We pray that you would light up our lives.

In Jesus' name. Amen. All over the world, men and women, boys and girls, are seeking what Jesus calls here the kingdom of God.

A number of years ago, I was in Sydney, Australia, and had to fly back through Dhaka in Bangladesh. And on arrival in Dhaka, it was Durga Puja. Their devotees were parading the goddess Durga around the streets.

The Durga Puja that year happened to coincide with Eid. And just a few days later, while I was there, the streets were running with blood as people made their sacrifices. I'd flown out of Sydney and was flying into London, two profoundly secular cities, where those who have sought to suppress the knowledge of God nonetheless seek the blessings which are promised by God's kingdom, as Jesus articulates it here.

[4 : 47] Across the globe, men and women, boys and girls, seek what Jesus calls here the kingdom of God. God's blessing, relationship with God, life in this life, life beyond this life, true life, the good life.

And we can see from Jesus' statement to the little child that he is speaking about the kingdom of God. Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child shall not enter it.

And we can see from Jesus' comment to the rich ruler that Jesus equates the kingdom of God with eternal life. The rich ruler says, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Jesus responds in due course how difficult it is for those with wealth to enter the kingdom. So eternal life, the kingdom of God, the good life, the blessed life.

All over the world, people are seeking after that, whether secular or religious. And those of us who have been here regularly over the last few weeks will know that this has been the issue that's been to the fore since chapter 17, verse 20, where Jesus is asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come.

[6 : 09] To which Jesus responds, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you. So how do we see the kingdom of God? How do we experience the kingdom of God?

How can we know for sure that we have eternal life? Well, last week, I think we will have seen something like this.

We see the kingdom of God as the far off are brought near. Those who deserve nothing come to Jesus and are brought near. This week, three further pieces are added to the jigsaw.

We see the kingdom of God as somebody's become nobodies. We see the kingdom of God as the impossible becomes possible. We see the kingdom of God as Jesus goes to his death on the cross and is raised.

First, somebody's becoming nobodies. Now, the two acts in verse 15, and if you haven't got the Bible open, it would be important to do that so that you can follow on page 1057.

[7 : 17] The two acts of verse 15 are entirely understandable. All of us want our kids to have the very best start and a blessed life.

They were bringing even infants to Jesus that he might touch them. The most hardened cynic would grant, surely, that there was something extraordinarily special about Jesus.

They brought their children to Jesus for his blessing, of course. And so the parents bringing children to Jesus is entirely understandable.

So also is the disciples' rebuke. When the disciples saw it, they rebuked them for bringing the children.

And the child in the first century had no rights, no rank, no possessions, no status. They weren't like our precious little cherubs today, who we spoil and fawn over as the grandfather of a newly born grandchild.

[8 : 22] I can tell you all about that. In Roman culture, the child was little more than a possession. And you can just imagine the disciples feeling, well, he's too busy for that.

You can't possibly bother the teacher now. He's got an agenda of this, followed by that, followed by that, followed by the other. So Jesus called them to him, saying, Now let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for of such is the kingdom of God.

Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God, like a little child, shall not enter it. Now this is profoundly counter-cultural in any culture.

Literally Jesus says, Of such is the kingdom of God. In other words, God's kingdom belongs to such as these. And it leaves us asking, Well, what is it about the little child that Jesus is commending?

Too many here are parents to fall for the silly idea that it is the child's innocence. Surely it is precisely the reason behind the disciples' reluctance to grant access.

[9 : 37] The infant can bring nothing. The infant is a nobody. The infant is dependent. Yet more of a key is given by what Jesus then says in verse 17.

Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child shall never enter it. Have you ever come across a child who returns the gift given?

I conducted a bit of an experiment. I'm told the must-have gift of the nine-year-old child is a troll or a tamagotchi. Could you imagine Christmas Day, out comes the highly prized tamagotchi.

Oh, no, no, mom, I'm taking it back. I'm going to get the receipt, get the money, and give you back the money. You never come across a child like that. So to whom does the kingdom of Jesus belong?

Oh, those who come to Jesus empty-handed. Those who come to Jesus saying, well, I really can add nothing. For those who come to Jesus, I can bring nothing to the party.

[10:45] I'm a receiver. I'm on benefits. I'm a non-contributor. There's a famous old hymn which sums this up so well.

Nothing in my hand I bring. Simply to your cross I cling. Naked come to you for dress.

Helpless look to you for grace. There's the child. The trouble is we've all been brought up to think that we can bring something to the party.

My kids went to school in Dulwich. I vividly remember them coming home week after week with stickers and badges stuck on their lapels. You know, well, best improved.

I'm afraid that's something you don't want to get, best improved. It means you're absolutely rubbish, and really the teachers couldn't think of anything else to give you. And I'm sorry if your child's just got that one, but we all know what it means.

[11:49] I remember one day a child coming back with clean plate award pinned to the lapel, and knowing the child could only assume that he had emptied the contents of his dinner plate over his next door neighbour, and then won the child.

The City of London is exactly the same, isn't it? That's what bonuses are all about. Clean plate awards, really. We've all been brought up to think that we can bring something to the party.

But the kingdom of God is for those who recognise they are nobodies. How attractive. Were the kingdom of God to be for somebodies, I'd be no different to this world.

I've really achieved something. I really am somebody, you know. Have you seen my career? Do you realise the kingdom of God, I've made my way in? Why? It would be just like Dulwich.

It would be hell. It would be ghastly. As the somebody strutted their stuff in the kingdom of God. It means anybody can enter, just as long as we're a nobody.

[12:59] It's infinitely diverse. It trumps every diversity policy, any pale imitation which the corporates or civil service might try and put in place.

Unless anybody across the whole world who acknowledges that they can bring nothing to the party, receives the kingdom of God.

Now, I can just imagine somebody saying, Well, hold on a second. Don't you see my record of good deeds? I really have done something. I've made something in my life, and I've given this, and I've done that, and I'm on the board of such and such, and look at my, you know, corporate responsibility and all the rest of it.

And that's where Jesus goes right next. I love teaching the Gospels. They're so logical. That's where we go right next. A ruler asked him, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

The kingdom comes as the impossible is made possible. Now, the presenting issue of this little incident is the ruler and his question, What must I do to inherit eternal life?

[14:13] A similar incident is recorded in Matthew and Mark's Gospel, and they have it that this man is young and that he knelt at the feet of Jesus.

It may or may not be the same incident. He's certainly rich. One friend of mine calls this individual Sir Rich. He is certainly wealthy. He's spiritual.

He's full of integrity, and he's decent. I suspect he lived right in the heart of the village. But did you notice how immediately Jesus responds with both theological correction and moral interrogation?

Theological correction. Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. How are you doing? I'm good. No, says Jesus.

A good teacher. Really? Do you get what you're suggesting? Nobody is good but God alone. So there's the theological correction.

[15:18] Now the moral interrogation. And what Jesus does is to cite commandment number 7, 6, 8, 9, and 5. Why in that order?

I have absolutely no idea. I'm sure you've got a theory. You can let me know afterwards. Do you know the commandments? Do not commit adultery. Do not murder. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness.

Honor your father and mother. Do not bear false witness. Do not bear false witness. Do not bear false witness. Do not bear false witness. All these I have kept from my youthful house.

And I have no doubt that he's sincere and honest in his answer. He has had just one wife. He didn't sleep around.

He hasn't killed anyone. He's full of integrity. He hasn't stabbed anybody in the back, at work, or in the front. He has really, really cared for mum and dad in their dotage.

[16:23] But I wonder, did we notice which commandments Jesus left out? Do we know what these commandments teach?

In essence, commandments 1 to 4 are, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, all your strength.

Commandment 10, you shall not covet. And so with this rich young man, who goes away, in other accounts, sad because he is extremely wealthy, with this young man, Jesus is like Jaspit Bumrah or James Anderson at the height of their powers.

He's like Lionel Messi cutting through a third division league side defense. He's like an internationally renowned barrister, cutting this guy straight through and getting right into the heart of the matter.

He slices through him. You think you can bring something to the party. You think you've got something to offer God. Oh, God would be really glad to have you on his side.

[17:40] You think you're a somebody. Have you loved the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength? Well then, will you give all your wealth?

There are few more self-satisfied in their moral positioning than the wealthy. Few have been schooled more thoroughly in the Pharisaic skills of optics than the rich.

Few with better personal PR departments. And few sufficient, more gullible to believe that their PR will win them, applaud it before God.

And this rich man, like so many, is entirely deluded. He thinks he's kept the commandments. He thinks that he has something to offer.

And Jesus cuts straight through him and pricks the bubble. He could have taken any of the other commandments.

[18:55] Elsewhere he does. Adultery. You've heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you, anybody who so much as looks at a woman with lust in his eyes has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Murder. You've heard it was said you shall not murder. But I say to you, anybody who says you fool has already committed murder in their heart. Integrity. Only let your yes be yes.

And your no be no. Now the disciples are amazed at this. Jesus says how difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom because self-righteousness is so prevalent.

And the disciples are absolutely staggered by the whole thing. And Jesus makes it clear. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

By which he means entry through into the kingdom of God is impossible by our own means. I have here a needle. I plucked it from the family sewing box this morning.

[20:03] And no doubt the needle Jesus had in mind was slightly bigger than this. But nonetheless it makes the point. I wish I had here a camel. Sadly we weren't able to achieve that.

But the point is obvious. As I say to the youth groups. Even if one were to get a liquidizer. And put the camel through it. It would be an impossibility.

And so the interaction between Jesus and the disciples. How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom. It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. And they respond.

Who then can be saved? And Jesus says what is impossible for man is possible for God. How does a person enter the kingdom of heaven?

Oh, as a somebody becomes a nobody. And as the impossible becomes possible. Only God can make it possible. And the difficulty for the wealthy person is not so much the wealth itself.

[21:09] As the delusion of respectability. And I've got something to give God. God will be glad to have me on his side.

I can really contribute. How hard it is for a wealthy person. To become like a child. Nothing in my hand I bring.

It might be worth going back to the Ten Commandments. This afternoon perhaps. And reading through them.

How is my track record? Nothing in my hand I bring. The rich have to recognize that they are nobodies.

Like everybody else. No amount of good deeds can make up for a track record of moral spiritual failure. Peter then interjects in verse 28.

[22 : 07] And it's such a fascinating. We're not going to spend long on this. Fascinating interjection. And he says see. We have left our homes and followed you. It's one of those wonderful interventions by Peter.

Look what we've done Jesus. We've really done something. To which Jesus responds. There is no one who has left house or wife.

Brother or parents. Or children. For the sake of the kingdom of God. Who will not receive many times more in this time. And in the age to come. Eternal life. In other words.

If we have turned to Jesus. No matter what we might have sacrificed. In terms of homes. Families for some. As they get rejected.

No matter what we may have sacrificed. We are only ever. Beneficiaries. Do we realize what he's entrusted to us?

[23 : 05] If we follow him. Whatever tiny. Sacrifice. We might have made. In our life. Is as nothing. Compared to the extraordinary wealth. He has lavished on us. In granting us eternal life. As the somebody becomes a nobody.

As the impossible. Is made possible. But how does God make the impossible possible? And that's where we go. Right next. In verse 31. Taking the twelve.

He said to them. See we're going up to Jerusalem. And everything that's written about the son of man. By the prophets. Will be accomplished. Fulfilled. For he will be delivered. Over to the Gentiles. And will be mocked.

And shamefully treated. And spat upon. And after flogging him. They will kill him. And on the third day. He will rise. They understood none of these things. And this saying was hidden from them. They didn't grasp what was said.

[24 : 07] As Jesus dies. And rises. So God makes possible. The impossible. The son of man is a title. For God's final Lord and King.

The ruler of all eternity. It comes from the Old Testament. Jesus uses that title for himself. Repeatedly in the Gospels. He takes the most exalted title.

In the whole of the Bible. In the Old Testament. And he claims it for himself. To the son of man was given dominion. And glory. And a kingdom. That all peoples.

Nations and languages. Should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion. Which shall never pass away. And his kingdom. One that shall never be destroyed.

So this is a kingdom title. Of the eternal everlasting kingdom of God. And Jesus claims to be the king. Now look what he says.

[25 : 03] The eternal God and ruler of all peoples. For everlasting ages. Will be taken by the nations. Mocked. Shamefully treated. Spat upon. Flogged.

And killed. One of the ways the Bible writers achieve. The videographer's slow motion effect. Is by inserting the little word and. It slows us down in our reading. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles.

And will be mocked. And shamefully treated. And spat upon. And after flogging him.

They will kill him. And on the third day. He will rise. How does God make it possible. For men and women.

[26 : 03] Like you and me. Who have absolutely. Nothing to bring to the party. But a catalogue. Of sin. How does he make it possible.

For us to enter his kingdom. Through the death of Jesus on the cross. As on the cross. Jesus carries God's judgment.

At our moral. Spiritual failure. And then offers us. Free of charge. Forgiveness. Membership. Entry. Belonging. For all eternity. One can speak about the cross forever.

Marvel at the cross. In all eternity. We will be. One of the most famous Christian leaders in the 20th century. In the middle of the 20th century. Was a gentleman called John Stott.

[27 : 04] Here is his. I think the best book there is on the cross. It runs to. 370 pages. One can explain the cross.

So simply. Alongside John Stott. One of the best known. And greatest. Christian leaders of the 20th century. Middle of the 20th century. An individual called John Edison.

Who gave his life. To teaching. Nine. To 13 year old. Children. The gospel. He also wrote. Hymns. They said of John Edison. That he was John Stott's equal. At the cross of Jesus. Pardon.

Is complete. Love and justice mingle. Truth and mercy meet. Though my sins condemn me.

[28 : 05] Jesus died instead. There is full forgiveness. In the blood. He shed.

There are five verses. It's brilliant. Here is the gateway. This is the ticket. This is the means.

By which access. Is granted. This is how the far off. Are brought near. This is how. Nobody's.

Become somebody's.

In the kingdom. This is how God. Makes possible. The impossible. The death of Jesus. On the cross. In our place.

And so Jesus was asked. When will the kingdom come? And Jesus responds. Oh the kingdom.

[29 : 02] Is in the midst of you. Where do we see the kingdom? In the death. And resurrection. Of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And if we will receive. Personally. For ourselves. The forgiveness. That Jesus offers. Full membership.

Immediately. Like the child. We belong. Because, And that is so beautiful.

Let's go.