

28th Sunday of Year

Jesus looked steadily at the young man and loved him. A lot hangs upon a look. This is one of the reasons for the controversy over Muslim women wearing the veil. Looking is something we do with the eyes, but the eyes are part of our face. A look is also about our facial expression, the shape of our eyebrows, our mouth. These signs are remarkably consistent among human beings even where gestures can mean different things. From our earliest childhood we learn to read the face of our mother, and she learns to read our expressions too. The veil is intended to prevent those who are not entitled to from reading a woman's thoughts and feelings, and so is not worn within the home, or in the presence only of other women or children. The controversy is about what kind of relationships are appropriate in society, not simply a fashion statement or religious badge.

St Mark in particular brings to our attention the physical signs of relationship in Our Lord's life and ministry, touch as well as the visual. In today's Gospel two words stand out: εμβλέψας and περιβλέψας. The first is translated 'looked steadily' in the case of the young man and later as 'gazed at' with the disciples. The second is translated 'looked round'. Jesus does not just see the young man, or glance at him. He looks him in the eye. Literally the word means 'look into'. It implies attention, focussing and concentration. Jesus uses the same word when he tells us to look at the birds of the air and flowers of the field, and how God cares for them. Eye contact is essential for personal communication. He looks on the young man with love, inviting him to a new relationship. The young man's response can also be read on his face without him saying a word. His face fell. We all know what that means. There is no smiling or eager response. The shutters come down. We can imagine the pursed lips and furrowed brow. He cannot look Jesus in the face.

Our Lord then looks round, not in an idle way, but making eye contact with each of his disciples as he comments on what has just happened. "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God!" We can also imagine the astonishment written on their faces, mouths open, eyes wide, eyebrows raised, looking round at each other – 'What chance for us then?' Jesus does not leave them with their astonishment. He looks them in the eye. "Everything is possible for God." It is not earthly riches that will gain us a place in the kingdom of God, but a living relationship with him. It is not riches in themselves that are the obstacle, but our attachment to them. Love involves trust, and trust means a willingness to let go, and be held and supported by the other person. This was a step too far for the young man. Peter speaks up for the disciples. They have already stepped out in faith and left their possessions behind, but they still seem to be thinking in terms of an earthly reward. Our Lord's response is interesting. He does not dismiss these hopes. They will receive the gift of eternal life in the world to come, but they will also find new relationships and all they truly need here and now, though they will also have to share the cross in the form of persecution. There is no need for them to be afraid.

Today, use your imagination. Jesus is with us in the Blessed Sacrament. Jesus is looking you in the eye, with love, and with forgiveness for your shortcomings. He wants you to put your trust in him and let go of anything that prevents this. It might be material things. It might be a human weakness or bad habit. It might be the pain of a broken relationship or some wrong you have suffered. Will you say, 'No! This is too much! I must hang on to whatever it may be'? Will you go away sad, like the young man, or filled with gladness and hope? When his precious Body and Blood are held up for adoration, and when you come to receive him, look on him with love and trust. Leave your burdens with him. This is the wisdom that enables us to recognise what is of true value in life.