

A sermon preached at Old Alresford & Ovington Mary Sumner 2021

Matt 19: 21: Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor”

In the course of ministry I have had to visit people in Durham Gaol, Winchester Prison and one of the Isle of Wight prisons. Even when you know you are only a visitor a prison is a scary place to be. You are in someone else’s system. What if they refuse to let you out again? How does the system work? Does anyone know that you are there?

*Jesus talks about this in one of his parables. It was best to settle a dispute before it got to prison. Once you were in prison you could not get out until you had paid the fine – and if you were not free to work how could you earn the money to pay the fine? This simple day-to-day example tells us something about the need to have some wealth in the ancient world: there were people who could and people who couldn’t. Without wealth you were probably one who couldn’t.

*But what about the case in court, you may ask. Very often the case was decided by which person gave the judge the largest bribe. It was a very different world to ours, with our concepts of innocent until proved guilty. You might well have to bribe some good citizens to come and speak on your behalf. So you can understand that no-one seriously thought about giving away money unless they were incredibly rich. They never knew when they might need to get out of jail.

*The question that the young man asks Jesus is this: “How am I right with God here and now?”. He is not asking about heaven or the life beyond death. He is asking about the here and now. And Jesus’ reply is also about the here and now.

-1-

If anyone thinks the Gospel is easy they should reflect on this passage. It is a real challenge. Jesus is asking the rich young man to become vulnerable. It must have been just as much a challenge to Mary Sumner. She probably never knew what it was to be totally helpless as many of the poor in Victorian England did. What did she make of this passage?

*She was born into privilege, that is into a banking family. That almost certainly meant that she felt able to confront life’s crises with some confidence – back to the coulds and could-nots. That sort of social background almost certainly enabled her – it gave her the confidence to believe that she could change things, though we should not ignore the fact that she suffered terribly before speaking in public.

*Furthermore her father-in-law was a Bishop. That was not just about social class, but about being in a position to know who could help. When it came to speaking in public there were Bishops who knew that Mary Sumner was the daughter-in-law of the Bishop of Winchester. The fact that she was working hard at social improvement meant that they were only too willing to support her. It would be easy to think that it must have been relatively easy – until you stop and ask one question.

*That question is: “How did she connect with so many people of so many different classes among so many different nationalities?” For me, that is the most astonishing thing. In spite of all the privilege that her status gave her she was able to reach out to women in so many places, in so many different circumstances. That her work managed to jump such a gap showed that she had read correctly that the work of motherhood was of universal concern, to nations everywhere and to rich and poor alike.

-2-

The Royal Naval Association, for former sailors, had a club in my parish in Sunderland and I was their Chaplain. The brewery gave them a bonus on their sales of alcohol and, as their Chaplain, I was invited to share this. So, every year I was given 4l free pints of beer as long as I drank them between Saturday morning and Sunday evening. If I didn't want them, and you will realise why I might not, there were plenty of people queueing to add my discarded pints to their 4l.

*It was the world of heavy industry, of coal-mining and ship-building. When you came into real contact with each you could understand why they needed to drink so much. But it had its price. So many local families had been impoverished, historically, either by gambling or drinking so that the week's wages were gone by Friday night with a whole week before the next pay day. This was the reality against which many mothers brought up their families, a reality with which Mary Sumner had to reckon.

*So, one of the features in North East Churches was "The Old Standards" by which I don't mean British Legion Banners that had been laid up. I mean those lifelong members of the Mothers Union who believed that better was possible. They were women who had been enabled through the work of Mary Sumner and the Mothers Union. In that sense she had "given away" her wealth and she had enabled family life to be envisaged differently.

*I am sure that it had a similar effect in the agricultural community, perhaps even in the city. The MU, with its emphasis on women supporting one another enabled many who otherwise would have had no hope. It was a reality that began to redeem many difficult circumstances.

Move on into the late 20th century, and into a different nation. This time we are in the West Indies. At that time there was an upsurge in violence on the streets. I don't know whether it was gun crime or whether it was knives, but many grandparents found them worrying about their young relatives and their lives being at risk. And so Streetpastors were born, people who would patrol the streets on busy nights and make sure that the streets were as safe as possible.

*In this country that has meant that, very largely, it has been grandparents who have taken on that work. They are out there, on the street, in the middle of the night looking after the vulnerable. Those who are too drunk to look after themselves. Those who have taken drugs and need some help. Others who are being drawn into fighting and possible criminal charges. The Police say that when there are Streetpastors on duty the atmosphere changes and crime rates are lowered.

*Very largely this work is among young people who are night-clubbing: as they talk, because Streetpastors offer a listening ear, so many of them are faced with horrendous family problems. One late teenage girl, on learning that Liz and I were married, said that no-one in their family had stayed married except her grandparents who were not nice people. Mary Sumner would have recognised the strategy of getting together to sort these problems.

*But, if we are honest, there are County Lines drug gangs, there is the huge issue of knife crime, and there is an increased incidence of the terrible kind of bullying that leads to death. These are issues we still need to address, as a society.

Preaching about this feels a bit like trying to get ashore from a canoe on a choppy winter afternoon. So much is changing about us. Especially the narratives by which we have interpreted the world are changing. And this leads us to agonise about which things we abandon and which we treasure.

*Two narratives in particular are important. Undoubtedly the Mothers Union spread through the British Empire. The Mothers Union, I understand, is still very vigorous in many former colonies. There are all sorts of things to regret over colonial life, but the fact is that the Mothers Union has adapted its work with mothers in many different cultures, and the solidarity of women is an international matter. The other narrative at play, of course, is the role of women in society and how far that should be defined by motherhood.

*Other changes are at work. We have the whole matter of truth and relativism. What is true and what is not is harder than ever to answer. Social media and the internet change our perception of things without necessarily offering any verifiable evidence. We are open to manipulation on a scale that the Emperor Nero can only have dreamed of.

*Through her work Mary Sumner enabled women of all classes and in many nations to support one another. She enabled many mothers to believe it was possible to bring up a family with confidence. That is her legacy, recognised in so many places.

*The question for us is “how can we enable mothers to play their crucial role in such a profoundly different society today? Is it still a matter of enabling mothers, of giving them confidence? Or does our relative wealth prevent us from reaching out to those in need, as she did with her work?