

## What am I looking at?

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Stones, mounds and metalwork  
Re-visiting it now: post Tom Greeves  
What am I looking at: human endeavour.
- 2: The M25 protesters: unrest at where we are  
What are we looking at? Climate change  
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- 3: Jesus' day: what were they looking at?  
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- 5: What are we looking at? What are we looking for?  
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What does it mean to be disciples of Jesus: to follow?  
What are we looking for in the age to come HERE

## *Mark 10.17-31*

<sup>17</sup>As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'

<sup>18</sup>Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. <sup>19</sup>You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother."' <sup>20</sup>He said to Jesus, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' <sup>21</sup>Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' <sup>22</sup>When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

<sup>23</sup>Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' <sup>24</sup>And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup>It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' <sup>26</sup>They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' <sup>27</sup>Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

<sup>28</sup>Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' <sup>29</sup>Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, <sup>30</sup>who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields – but with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life. <sup>31</sup>But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

Sermon preached at Old Alresford & Ovington Trinity 19 2021

Mark 10: <sup>22</sup>When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions

It must have been around 1990 when we found ourselves having our first real holiday on Dartmoor. I had been reading up about life on Dartmoor, especially life in Victorian times and earlier. One of the consistent themes that came up was tin mining. It sounded very exciting. A mine. I wondered what it would look like. I had been down a coal mine – would it look like that?

One Sunday after church in Devon we headed off to the open Moor, to a place known by the locals as “Happy Valley”. I suppose that the first thing we were aware of was that this part of the Moor did not have a huge amount of vegetation. Then we became aware of various Mounds and gullies that were obviously very old. Further on we came across the odd ruined building – they did not stand more than a few inches high but they obviously meant something.

\*We were back there again last week. Around the year 2000 we were lucky enough to be taken round these tin mining remains by Dr Tom Greeves who had studied these mines, I am tempted to say, “at some depth”. He had interviewed the last generation of miners to work them, he knew something of the families and their homes, and he had various photographs of the mines in action. We learned a great deal.

\*So this time we did not have to ask “What are we looking at?” in the way that we had to the first time we saw these remains. Now we could identify the hostel where the miners lived, the engine room, the buddles where the miners separated the iron ore from the water that had flushed it out – even the remains of a chimney or a water wheel. “What are we looking at?” is the question at issue in this morning’s gospel.

“What are we looking at?” is a question the newspapers have been looking at in the last fortnight. Not least they have been looking at the people who have stuck themselves to the roads so that, by dislocating all the traffic movement they have been able to focus attention on the issues of climate change. If you believe the world is about to end you will go to any lengths to try and prevent that happening.

\*So, when you ask “what are we looking at?” as people protest on the M25 the immediate answer is that we are looking at one of the effects of climate change. For those who are brave enough to look at it face on, it is a frightening prospect. To reflect on what it would be like for London to be flooded because the Thames Barrier is no longer high enough, or to imagine living in temperatures above 50 degrees: you don’t need much imagination to realise the consequences of this. We are looking at disaster. \*Then, of course, there is another event in this past week – the so-called Pandora Papers. For some time it has been known that very few people own a great deal of the planet’s wealth. Today the top 1% of households throughout the world own 43% of all personal wealth. The bottom 50% of households own only 1%. It is now some 50 years or so since Bishop John Taylor pointed out this gross inequality and the consequences that flow from it.

\*So, what are we looking at? We are looking at a need to improve the world. That inequality translates into countries that cannot afford the Covid vaccine, or who cannot afford to educate their children, or who cannot feed themselves. What are we looking at: we are looking at a need to improve the world in which we live and to value everyone and not just the powerful.

So, thinking about the people who were standing around Jesus when the wealthy man approached to ask his question: what were they looking at? What was the background against which Jesus was teaching people? We may imagine that Jesus was stage centre at this time – but he wasn't. He was just one person on a crowded stage, just one man in the market place trying to make his voice heard.

\*What were they looking at? Well, for one they were looking at the occupying forces of the Roman Army. They were seeing the Roman governor, Pilate, and all the Roman apparatus of local government. They didn't like what they saw because the Romans were pagans. They had no idea of what the Jewish faith was all about, and inevitably they kept causing offence. So they were both hated as foreigners, but also as people who had taken away the Promised Land from them.

\*And there was one important question on the lips of the people of Jesus day. It was still there in St Paul's Day. When is God, our God, our trustworthy and righteous God, when is he going to do something about this? He cannot want his chosen people and their promised land treated like this. That's why there was so much excitement about the appearance of John the Baptist. Has the time arrived at last? Remember the opening words of Jesus' in St Mark's Gospel "The right time has come" We are approaching the time when God will put everything right.

\*But if you got an answer to that question there was another question that you might want to ask, like the man who comes to Jesus. When that time of change, of great change, comes will I be one of those people who is "in" or "out"? That is the question that he is asking Jesus in this morning's Gospel. It is not a question about heaven – or about life after death. That would have been a luxury they could not have afforded. No, this is a question about the here and now. Jesus is announcing change now, not at some point in the distant future.

But like all good Rabbis Jesus, when he is asked a question, often asks a question in reply. And the question he asks the wealthy man is "What are you looking at?" or, to put it another way, what is your starting point? As you look at the world about you, what is it that you see that causes you ask this question about when God is going to act to put things right?

\*To which the man replies that he has always tried to do the right thing. He has kept the commandments from his youth upwards – but now he is worried that he may have missed something or overlooked a commandment – So can Jesus tell him what they are. Did you notice what Jesus does with the Ten Commandments? He doesn't start with the obvious ones – with numbers 1, 2 and 3. He doesn't start by reciting the commandments that relate to God. He starts with the commandments that relate to other people. In other words, he turns the Ten Commandments inside out. And he ends with "Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor".

\*It is that very last demand "Go and sell all that you have and give to the poor" that takes the place of the missing commandments about God. This is what it means to put God first in your life as the First commandments insist. It is to give up everything of yourself for the sake of God's world, for people who cannot help themselves because they have no resources. Jesus is inviting him to enter more deeply into what he knows already, to see for himself the reality of God behind the commandments.

\*And that moment that they have all been waiting for, the patriots, those excited by the preaching of Jesus, those yearning for the righteousness of God, that comes when Jesus hangs upon the cross and when the question "what are you looking at" becomes even more crucial. That is the moment, with its flipside of the resurrection, when God acts to bring in a new age when all will be put right – if you have eyes to see.

I have a question to ask you this morning – perhaps you have guessed what it might be? What are we looking at? With television, films, social media and photographs perhaps we look at more images in one week than the crowd around Jesus would have seen in a lifetime. What do you notice as you look at all the photos on tv, on the news or through what people share with you? And, a second question, what are you looking for? Do you believe there is a need for the “age to come” – that God needs to do something about such appalling injustices in our world?

\*Mark’s Gospel tells us: “The right time has come”. So, where do we find the age to come? If someone is looking at us as they read the words of Jesus where can they see things which connect us with Jesus? Do they see in our lives an instance of the last being first and the first being last? That is very much a sign that God is turning an upside down world upside down. What are the other hallmarks of the Age to come in our lives? Jesus asks “repent and believe the good news” as he starts his ministry.

\*And, then, we also have to ask the question which the man himself is asking in this morning’s Gospel: what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus – to follow him? Is there more to it than this? This incident that Mark reports suggests that Jesus is not asking us to take on more beliefs but he is asking us to reflect more deeply on what we already know or believe. What we believe shapes how we respond to God’s world and the part we play in setting it free.

\*We are used to hearing this passage as a story about heaven. It is not. It is a story about earth. The age to come is one in which we are now living, ever since the death of Jesus on the cross. That is what we should be looking at, what we should be noticing amid all the trivia of our age. “The right time has come, the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news”. It is not about ancient Judea, it is not about a future heaven: it is about this earth, it is about here and now.