

Sunday 14 October 2018

St Andrew's Church, Cobham, 8 a.m. and 10 a.m.

Amos 5.6-7, 10-15; Hebrews 4.12-end; Mark 10.17-31

### **The Contractual Christian**

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Let me ask you a question.

Are you a contractual Christian?

In other words, do you see your Christian life as something in the nature of a deal with God? A transaction? A quid pro quo??

For example, some people see life as a Christian as trying hard to be a good person, so that at the end of their life God will be pleased with them and welcome them into heaven.

Or some people see life as a Christian as being all about obeying God's laws so that he will make them a better person, free them from all the ugly, sinful things they dislike about themselves – in effect, it's about their self-image.

Or it may be a combination of both.

In any event, I call this way of thinking about Christian life as the 'Heavenly Vending Machine' contract – you put something in, and get something out. You give God something, he gives you something back.

Now, I don't mean to be flippant, or judgmental about people's efforts to do good in the world, whatever their motivation.

But for the Christian - the follower of Christ - as soon as we start seeing our faith as a deal or a transaction or a contract, we do ourselves a terrible damage - we cut ourselves off from Christ, and everything that could be ours. There is only one way to truly enter into the Christian life – and it is not by fulfilling a contract. What is it, then?

This morning's gospel story of the rich young ruler gives the answer.

Here is a fine young man, a man who is passionate about being good. He has obeyed the Law since he was a child, trying to be a good person, acceptable to God. But obviously, he feels he has not achieved his goal. He senses that he is lacking something. And now, in Jesus he recognizes someone who is exactly what he would like to be - good. In his passion to be part of God's kingdom, he

comes running to Jesus, throws himself on his knees and says, in effect: ‘How do I become like you?’

Jesus looks at him hard and loves him. (I love this image in the gospel. Just imagine Jesus looking at you like that – with total love, but also piercing the deepest secrets of your soul – you would want to run towards and away from it at the same time, I suspect.)

What Jesus sees in the rich young ruler is a person who sees his spiritual life as a contract with God. The deal is that he will obey God, and in return he will become godly, and acceptable to God. He will be able to think of himself as good, just as Jesus is good. It’s the Heavenly Vending Machine contract all over – put in the effort and out comes goodness!

This is what Jesus sees in the young man’s heart and, because he loves the young man, he reaches into his chest, rips his heart out, and holds it out for him to see clearly.

There is one thing you lack, Jesus says. And it is me. Come and follow me.

Follow me.

And here we have the true essence of the Christian life. It has nothing to do with a contract or a deal or a bargain or a quid pro quo.

It is about one essential thing – it is about wanting to be with Jesus, to follow him, to go wherever he takes us, in total trust, without any thought of clinging to ourselves or holding anything back from him.

Being a good Christian doesn’t mean using our faith in order to make ourselves better people. That amounts to treating God like a vending machine – in go the good deeds, and the church-going, and the holy communion, and the trust in Jesus, and out comes a good person.

Yuk! We must never, ever think like that! That’s like saying, ‘I don’t want you, Lord, I want myself; but all clean and good and filled with the Holy Spirit, so I can say, “This is what God has done for me”,’ [from Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* 3/12]. It’s just using God for our own gratification, and disguising it as holiness. I said it before and I say it again. Yuk!

That is not what being a Christian is all about. The essential spirit of the Christian life is simply to want to be in humble contact with Jesus all the time, 24/7, loving him, listening for him, obeying him, performing our small daily tasks for his glory ... *following* him. The most important thing we can do in our Christian lives is to

stop trying to be good, and just forget about ourselves, turning all our focus from our own efforts onto the person of Jesus. The most important thing we can do is to *abandon* ourselves to Jesus. That is the one thing we lack.

This is the challenge that Jesus issues to the rich young ruler.

We must be careful in this story not to put the emphasis in the wrong place. The truly important bit here is not that Jesus told the young man to give away his money. Some people see the message of this story as being that if you want to please God, then give away your money. But that's just the Vending Machine contract all over again. No, the important thing is that Jesus told the young man to follow him. The reason he tells him to get rid of his money is because he can see that it is the money that will stop the man from following him. The young man immediately sees this himself – he is full of sorrow when he realizes that he can't do what he needs to do – namely, exchange his position as a leader respected for his goodness to become a dusty, penniless nobody, even if he will gain everything by it.

That same challenge that Jesus issued to the young man applies to us today, here and now: stop trying to be good, and just follow me. Deep in your heart and your spirit, just let go, and abandon yourself to me. And if something is stopping you from doing that, get rid of it. If you need to change something in your life in order to follow me more closely, if you need to surrender something you are attached to, then so be it. In our culture and in this place, it is likely to be money, and all the comfort and false security that come from having it. But it may be something else too – a deep-seated sin in your life; an old resentment, perhaps, or pride, or fear, or a terrible temptation. Only you will know.

As I draw to a close, I invite you to pray with me.

God of abandonment and generosity: help us to want one thing, and one thing only: to follow you, wherever that may take us. If ever there is something that prevents us from following you, please give us the courage to face it and to get rid of it. We ask this for the love of your Son, Jesus, and in his strength to achieve it.

Amen.