

Later in the gospel Jesus will answer a scribe's question as to the first of the commandments with the commandment to love God and then one's neighbour as oneself. But he doesn't do that here. Perhaps because it would be too much for the rich man to understand. Full as he is with concern for his riches. And this is perhaps true for most of us on our way still to full understanding, concerned naturally enough with making our way in the world, bringing up children, securing a future. And so Jesus addresses him first with those lesser commandments which seem of more immediate concern – the things we can do, or not do, to lead a virtuous life, one which will earn us a place in the kingdom – or so we think. 'Oh I've done all those things' says the rich man, which leaves the greater question pending, the one the man's not yet ready for – the greatest commandment of all – to love God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and with all your strength, and then one's neighbour as oneself. And one is reminded of the vows taken at marriage 'I promise to be true to you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. I will love you and honour you all the days of my life' – and the long journey then, or in some cases not so long, is learning the full import of those so easily made vows and the impossibility of it all without grace, without God, that is doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves, without God that is being the love between us.

What the rich man is being asked to do is to make room for this love.

There was a lovely obituary in yesterday's Guardian to the potter Richard Batterham, the last of the great British potters in the Bernard Leach tradition and not at all as well known as some of the others because he maintained a very understated approach to both himself and to his work – captured in a few rare statements such as this:

'The main work is not to make pots but to allow them to come, to allow them to grow, to allow them to be alive and to communicate warmth and life in that uncannily direct and undemanding way that true and naked work can, vulnerable as it is. To make this possible I feel that it is necessary to use our skills and materials with humility and respect. This requires a certain quietness of living.'

This is what Jesus is doing with the rich man, and us.

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