Not many weeks ago, I was preaching about migrants and refugees, and their profound experience of loss, because of the events in the news. Today, our readings direct us again to think about loss – but this time, the loss which can befall the rich and apparently secure …

Do you see yourself in the readings today? Do they speak into your own experience? Both readings describe people working through loss – grief, and bereavement. The reading from Job is agonising in its intensity: why is this happening, says Job? What’s going on? I turn this way, and that – if only I could find God, but he has disappeared. His whole experience, as we also know from the rest of the book, is one of loss. Loss of possessions, loss of health, loss of status – a complete loss of security.

At the centre of the Gospel reading is another person dealing with loss. Like Job, before catastrophe befell him, he is rich. In fact, this is the key thing about him: the story appears in all three gospels, and he is variously described as young, or a ruler. The only aspect all three gospels agree on is that he is rich. And therefore, of course, secure: for to be rich is to be in control of one’s own world, it is the ultimate security. I heard a story just the other day of a friend’s relative who had made a great deal of money in banking. But standing beside his dying mother’s bedside he was completely undone: here, for the first time, was something that could not be fixed by throwing money at it. After all, he discovered, he was actually just like anybody else, he was not actually in control of his own destiny nor of those who were dear to him.

Here in this story is a young man who is confident, but wanting to build his confidence yet further. We don’t know whether he is humble or not – but Jesus tests him as he approaches with what might be seen as a patronising way of addressing him. Good teacher, he asks – are you able to confirm that I’m secure? Maybe he just wants to know for himself. Perhaps he wants others to hear the answer too, and admire him? But straightaway, Jesus deflects attention onto God, and the demands that are all too well known, to devote one’s life fully to him. What do you think the man was expecting to hear? The implication is that he was expecting reassurance. Yes yes, he says, I’ve done all this … do we hear a desire for approval, or a lack of assurance? Does he somehow realise that this isn’t quite enough? Suddenly, it seems, that he really wants to know the answer: and suddenly, it all gets personal. Jesus’ first answer was quite general, it seems: now he really looks at him, and he sees what’s going on. He’s been relying on himself. On his ability, perhaps as a wealthy person, to live a ‘good life’. To be generous and honest, and upright. But what he hasn’t seen is that eternal life – life in the Kingdom of God – is not for those who get things right, but for those who trust in God. And Jesus, not unkindly, pulls the rug right from under his feet. Rather a nice rug, as it happens. But one that conceals an awful truth: the man isn’t secure at all. His life has been built upon shaky foundations, and the only way for him to really learn what life in the Kingdom of God is about is to swap his security in possessions, and to discover instead a security in God. And so he is plunged into loss – the loss of the security which he thought he possessed …

Having got so personal, Jesus looks up from the man – who has gone away grieving, doubtless in shock, and speaks to the others to explain. It’s hard, says Jesus, for rich people to trust God. And so they miss out. It’s like a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle. If you’ve heard the story about the gate in the wall of Jerusalem which was shaped like a camel, but you had to unload the camel to get through it, I’m sorry to tell you but it’s made up – the story first appeared about a thousand years ago, so it’s been doing the rounds for a while. But it’s a way of suggesting that actually we can do what’s needed. What Jesus is
saying is, you haven’t got a chance: if you’re rich, God is just going to have to work a miracle to get you into heaven.

Which takes us back to Job. Job was a very rich man. Until he wasn’t. The he was a very poor man, covered in boils, and with the sort of friends that would make you glad for enemies. But strangely, he was closer to God as a poor man than he had been when he was rich. There are things to be mined from those times when things are hard, that we just can’t get hold of when everything’s easy. Not that that is necessarily much comfort at the time, but it’s true. I guess my own experience of that became most acute when Mo, my first wife, was becoming seriously ill. Life in the vicarage was hard, very hard. One day it became so difficult that I had to do a difficult thing for a man, and a clergyman at that – I had to pick up the phone and ask someone to come over and help. Do you know – it wasn’t so bad, and God linked me up to some people who were really glad to help. And over time, I learned to ask again. And after a while, I found that I didn’t even have to ask – that God would prompt people to pick up the phone, ring the doorbell with whatever we needed.

Although we had not chosen it, we were at that moment living right in the heart of the Kingdom of God, right in what RS Thomas described as the ‘Bright Field’ – and there was treasure there, although it was hard won. After a long time life moved on, and the sense of the immediacy of God, and that acute dependence on his provision, faded. I won’t say I became rich, exactly – but certainly more secure, in an ordinary, worldly kind of way...

Let me share the poem with you:

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

I wonder if that was the Rich Young Ruler’s experience: for a moment, light shone on the place that he needed to dig for treasure, but he was so busy holding on to the treasure that he was already carrying that he missed the real prize that was being offered him.

So, our readings hold before us two people who find themselves, ultimately, very close to God. Both have known riches. One still has them, and in wanting to hang on to them, loses the chance to gain something so much better. Offered the chance to take his discipleship deeper – to journey with Jesus for goodness sake – he realises that he’s missing out on the greatest chance of his life, but he just can’t do it. He reminds me of the man I saw on a bungee jump, all tied on but just not able to make that leap. But at the same time, he realises that his life is now impoverished. He’s really stuck! My commentary on the gospel says: “Contrary to the dominant voices of our culture, but in keeping with the entire section on discipleship in Mark, this text proclaims the good news that the way to be really rich is to die to wealth. If this message does not take our breath away, if we are not shocked, appalled, grieved or amazed, we have either not yet
heard it or heard it so often that we do not really hear it any more.” If this hits you this morning, perhaps you know what you need to do? This is a classic ‘call story’: Go/sell/give – come/follow. It’s the only one in the gospels where Jesus’ invitation is refused. What’s your response?

But what of those who find themselves, like Job, in a desperately hurting place? Where is the good news for you, this morning? You have already done your grieving, or are perhaps in the midst of it. Well, a large part of the answer is actually in the readings we didn’t have. The danger of taking bits of the Bible on their own is that you can miss important parts of the message. If we had heard the New Testament reading set for this morning, you would have heard that in Jesus we have a “high priest who is able to sympathise with our weakness, for he has in every respect been tested as we are ... so we should approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and grace for help in time of need.” Jesus is to be found right in the midst of your experience of loss and abandonment – this of course is the Coventry story, the story of a cathedral ruined and rebuilt, which speaks into lives which see themselves in ruins.

And the missing verses from Job? I don’t know why they missed them out. Perhaps because in part they reinforce the sense of deliberate abandonment by God, which is surely Job’s interpretation of what is happening. But they also say this:

*Job 23.10:* But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come out like gold.

If the purpose of life is to learn to rely and to trust in God, it can take extreme experience to bring us to a place to hear Christ’s call. Jesus looks at each of us this morning, and loves us. Some of you may be in places of wealthy security, others in poverty and insecurity. Many of us, perhaps, somewhere in between. Jesus looks on us all, with challenge, or with compassion – probably with both. What does each of us need to do to learn to trust him, and learn what life is all about? It’s a hard lesson – and all the elements of the bereavement cycle may come to play: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, even depression as we realise that our own security is not up to the task. But on the other side of all of that is the acceptance of the One who Accepts us – and gives us the free gift of Eternal Life.

That’s real treasure.