

**“Stuck”**

(Mark 10.17-31)

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**Introduction**

Teresa of Avila (16<sup>th</sup> century mystic), whose feast day we celebrate this Tuesday (October 15), is one of the great spiritual guides of the Christian contemplative tradition. And she gives a fascinating insight into today’s gospel text – the story found in all 3 of the synoptic gospels, and traditionally known as the “*Rich Young Ruler*”.<sup>1</sup>

Characteristic of how the mystical tradition reads Scripture, Teresa hears this gospel as divine insight into the Way of faith... the path of our journey to union with GOD. In summary, it’s about being stuck... and what the Spirit does to shake us free so we can resume the journey.

**Teresa’s Vision**

Teresa describes our journey into GOD using the metaphor of a castle.<sup>2</sup> At the centre of the castle is a chamber or mansion of wonderful light, which is our eventual union with GOD. This is surrounded by concentric circles of 6 chambers through which we progress to reach our ultimate fulfilment.

In the First Mansion, we intentionally begin the journey of faith, and take our first steps in adult prayer and reflection.

In the Second Mansion we grow in these practices somewhat, and our desire for God is further stimulated. There is lots of resistance, lots of struggle... but we do grow.

In the Third Mansion, however, many people say ‘*That’s far enough*’ and stop – they set up a permanent home here. Teresa calls the 3<sup>rd</sup> chamber the ‘*The Dwelling Place of the Rich Young Ruler*’.

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<sup>1</sup> It’s *Matthew* that provides this detail. It’s absent in *Mark’s* version.

<sup>2</sup> Her major teaching work is called *The Interior Castle*.

(Let's turn to the gospel story itself...)

### **The Gospel – The Rich Young Ruler (Part 1) – vs.17-20**

A man runs up to Jesus with a BIG question...

*'What must I do to inherit/achieve/deserve life eternal?'*

Is he a genuine seeker, or is he looking for some sort of approval here? When the man opens with the expected social flattery, addressing Jesus as "Good teacher"... Jesus snaps back, **'Why do you call me good?'**

Something is happening here!

But after that initial challenge, Jesus settles into what would have been the conventional... the standard answer – a summary of the Commandments... the accepted list of righteous, moral behaviour, effectively asking the man, *'Are you paying attention to these?'* The man answers, *'Yes, I am... indeed I've kept **all** those rules **all** my life!'*

What are we supposed to hear in this? He's certainly confident in his own righteousness. And it does sound somewhat inflated... but if you overlook that, he's saying to Jesus... *'Yes, I am a good man, living a moral life.'* There's nothing in the text to suggest anything otherwise... for instance, no-one in the spectating crowd challenges his assertion. He is a good man.

**But...** Jesus is NOT impressed. He doesn't give this man the affirmation he's looking for. I imagine an uncomfortable pause...

But before we go to Jesus's response, let's hear some more from Teresa...

Teresa says, the Third Mansion is where you find the *good people...* the nice people... like us.

- People who do good things for others... care for their family and do charitable works.
- People largely in control of their bad habits, and who live socially acceptable, well-ordered lives...
- There's some sort of prayer-life happening here – it may not be terribly deep, but it happens, even if somewhat haphazardly.
- And there's definitely fruit from all of this. Good things happen around these people.
- Indeed, such people generally have the respect of their community – they're well-thought of.

But... it can easily be a place of self-satisfaction, comfort and delusion. (*"I've kept **all** those rules **all** my life!"*) It can be a bubble of unconscious complacency. It's easy to believe that one's done 'OK'... certainly *'better than **them** anyway'*... and so Teresa notes that it's easy to be secretly critical of others. And she says, it's the easiest of all places on the journey to get stuck. Too many people settle in the Third Mansion and say, *'I've come far enough.'*

Teresa has compassion for people stuck in this place... for it's not nearly as comfortable as it looks. Underneath the public persona of order and decency, a huge amount of energy is being expended... keeping it all together. It's hard work being consistently good! The continual striving for righteousness is exhausting, and over the years an internal tiredness builds. She describes it as being like someone watering a large garden, by drawing-up bucket after bucket from a well... with aching arms and tortured back... pushing-on through the tiredness... even when the well is almost empty. You have to keep going, even when there's nothing left to draw on. Teresa writes, *"This is an unhappy state. We are labouring under a great load of earth... Yet it is self-chosen."*

This Third Mansion... is the furthest limit we can reach by our own goodness... our own efforts. Try as we might, we cannot open the door into the further, deeper mansions ...  
*Until the crisis comes!*

### ***The Gospel – The Rich Young Ruler (Part 2) – vs.21-22***

Teresa says, when we are stuck in the Third Mansion, the Spirit will act – repetitively – using whatever life presents, to shatter our comfort, complacency and self-deception. It can be anything, any crisis – illness, relationship breakdown, death of a loved one, failure at work, depression... or even the simple unhappiness, the awareness that *"something's not right here."* Anything that breaks the illusion of our righteousness and control.

And so... back to the text... the story of Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler...

Jesus looks at the man and feels love for him... It's an important detail in the text... because at *face-value* what Jesus is about to say sounds harsh – even cruel. Jesus says...

*'Well then, seeing you've kept all the commandments... there's only one thing left to do. Sell everything you have and give the money to the poor... and then come on the road with me.'*

Jesus knows... the watching crowd knows... everyone knows... that this is way beyond what this man is capable of.

He walks away...

*“When he heard this, he was shocked and went away with a heavy heart, for he had many possessions.”*

He can't do it. He knows he can't do it. He doesn't have *that* level of faith... that level of trust in GOD. He walks away in deep sadness, knowing the reality of where he is...

Teresa says, Jesus' response is not cruelty. Rather, Christ looks into the man's heart and sees his inherent goodness... indeed his authentic desire for God, stuck beneath this public performance of righteousness. And so he administers a high voltage shock... a shot of adrenalin... that may just get this comfortable stuck heart beating again.

In this shock is the opportunity of the Spirit! Here's his chance to get moving again.

### ***The Gospel – The Rich Young Ruler (Part 3) – vs.23-27***

Speaking of the crisis that inevitably comes in the Third Mansion, Teresa says... *‘Everything depends on what happens next, or rather, on what choices are made... indeed whether any are made at all.’*

The gospel encounter ends with Jesus and the disciples discussing how difficult it is for a wealthy person to access the Kingdom... (which is of course true and worthy of reflection). Indeed, some in our Christian history – notably Anthony of Egypt and Francis of Assisi – took *these* words of Jesus literally and gave away *everything*... and they knew great freedom as a consequence.

Yes, this is a path available to the Rich Young Ruler... but we know that it is an unusual and rare path – very few walk it.

If this is all we can hear from this story, then it is indeed – for most of us – a gospel of despair.

As the disciples ruefully reflect, *‘If that's how it is, then who can be saved? Who can find abundant life?’*

**We** hear the story and say, *‘That's too hard Lord. I can't walk that path.’*

But in terms of the critical next step, what the Rich Young Ruler needs to do... is **allow the truth to enter his head and heart.**

- *'I am not what I pretend to be.'*
- *'I am not THERE yet.'*
- *'Indeed, the journey lays before me... stretching into the distance.'*
- *'I've been stationary too long. It's time to get moving again... time to get back on the path.'*

That's what he needs to do – recognise the truth and get on the road again... and the Spirit will do the rest. Indeed, what we learn in the Third Mansion... is that we can't get any further on our own. The rest of the journey opens up through surrender... allowing the Spirit to carry us. Jesus says, *'What is impossible for us to achieve by our own efforts, is absolutely possible for God.'*

Teresa says... *'Everything depends on what happens next, or rather, on what choices are made... indeed whether any are made at all.'*