14 October 2018: Choral Eucharist
The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity
Amos 5: 6–7, 10–15, Hebrews 4: 12–end, Mark 10: 17–31
The Revd Canon Dr Edmund Newey, Sub Dean

‘Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’ In nomine…

I’d like us to think today about two brief phrases from our readings this morning. The first – ‘the eye of a needle’ – comes from Saint Mark, and the second – ‘the throne of grace’ – from the letter to the Hebrews. I’ve chosen them partly because they sum up much of what the readings have to say to us, and partly because it’s often little phrases like these that stick best in our minds. We remember turns of phrase like these in the same way that we remember the expression on the face of a starving child, rather than the precise details of a television news report.

Jesus’s image of the camel and the eye of a needle is, I think, my earliest memory from the scriptures. Coming from a fairly pious family, I had occasional bedtime Bible stories, but I have to admit that on the whole I found them less than gripping. But the camel and the eye of a needle was different. It fascinated me – it made me feel rather as I did, and do, when looking up at the stars on a clear night. The contrast in scale between the camel and the needle’s eye, or between the stars and me, seemed so startlingly incomprehensible.

I dare say you’ll have heard the explanation occasionally given of this image. It’s said that by the eye of a needle, Jesus was referring to a particularly narrow gate in the walls of Jerusalem, one so tight that a small camel could only just be squeezed through, and even then only once its load of baggage had been taken off and carried through by hand. The moral then becomes this: that we must unburden ourselves of our baggage of needless wealth if we are to enter the holy city. It makes a picturesque story, but unfortunately there’s no evidence whatsoever that such a gate existed. And actually I think that that sort of attempt to rationalise Jesus’s teaching can be rather dangerous. By explaining, we
often end up *explaining away*. Blunting our Lord’s teaching to make it more palatable, rather as the orange glow of our urban street lighting rubs out our ability to wonder at the beauty of the stars in the night sky.

When Jesus uses images like this we have to remember what an accomplished and popular preacher he was. He knew how to get a people’s attention, how to make the ones at the back of the crowd – the idly curious, the indifferent – stop and pay attention. His parables and sayings, just as much as his miracles, are told to confront us, to bring us face to face with God’s kingdom and its demands upon us.

‘*Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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*.’ Those are not and should not be easy words for any of us to hear, because all of us here must, in global terms, count ourselves as rich men and women. But though this is a hard saying, it should not be a discouraging one. Wealth in Jesus’s day was seen as a sign of God’s blessing, a gift to enable one to perform one’s religious duty. Christian faith has kept some of that understanding of wealth, but it is also keenly aware how wealth can act as a barrier both between us and God, and between us and other people. Wealth and the possessions that go with it can make us forget our equality before God and lead us to put our faith either in ourselves or our possessions, but not in God. And if we do that we are becoming idolaters, making unto ourselves graven images of ourselves and our belongings.

So Jesus is warning us that the eye of the needle is of our own making. If we become surrounded with the riches and the cares of this world, which very often are merely ways of extending our own egos, we make the eye ever smaller, furring up ever more thickly the arteries by which we can know and love God as God knows and loves us.

The second phrase I would like to look at is *the throne of grace*. The letter to the Hebrews, from which it comes, is one of the most overlooked books of the Bible, mainly I suspect because of its tendency to theological overload: *the throne of grace* is just one of Hebrews’ array of arcane theological phrases in the genitive case: *the order of Melchisedek*, *the Bread of the presence*, *the Ark of the Covenant*, *the throne of glory*, to take but a few. Locutions such as these fascinate and confuse in equal measure. But the writer to the Hebrews uses these terms not to frighten us, but simply to show us the extent of what we have received in the life and death of Jesus. Each of these phrases is taken from the OT, but Hebrews shows us how radically new their meaning has
become in the light of the New Covenant with God in Jesus. The throne of God in the OT is a throne of glory, unapproachably far beyond our reach, a mercy seat we can know but can never approach. But in Jesus, so Hebrews tells us, that throne of glory has become a throne of grace, a throne on which we are made worthy to take our seat with Christ: ‘Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’.

In the OT the throne of God’s glory is the mercy seat, the Ark of the Covenant, which the Israelites carry around with them as the focus of their worship. And the significance of the Ark is that it is an empty space. The Israelite Holy of Holies is the empty space between the two cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant. Unlike the religious cults of the surrounding nations, with their idols and images, the Israelites worshipped a God of whom no image could be made, whose presence was symbolised by an empty space. And if that is true in the OT, it is even more true of the NT, centred as it is on the empty tomb, the sign that Jesus has gone ahead of us, victorious over death, to prepare a place for us with God.

‘The eye of the needle’, ‘the throne of grace’: two striking but baffling images. But in the end they are images of the same thing, pictures of the empty space at the centre of our lives that is the home of God. It is a space that we all too easily crowd out with wealth, cares, possessions, selfishness, but which we are called to recognise as the throne of grace, to which Jesus invites us; the eye of the needle, by which we can come to acknowledge God at the heart of our being.

‘O God, thou art nearer to me than I am to my self’, said Saint Augustine. And what was true for Augustine in the fourth century remains true for us now, if we will clear the clutter from our hearts, and recognise our place in God and God’s place in us.

In nomine…