"What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life?"

By the Reverend Ruth Li

Inheriting eternal life comes from God's promise through our faith, as illustrated in John 3:16; 1 John 5:11-13.

Today's Gospel raises two principal questions. One is "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" and the other is "Who is my neighbour?" These two questions are connected and raised by a lawyer, an expert in the Law of Moses.

Inheriting eternal life in the Old Testament referred to the land, wealth, herds, and the promised reward that Abraham and his descendants, who belonged to God's covenant, would receive. The Israelites were a covenanted people and God's promise also included an age to come.

In today's Gospel, from St Luke, it is the lawyer who tests Jesus by asking Him, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" The lawyer did not want to really know what he must do to "inherit eternal life". Instead, he wanted recognition and validation that he had already achieved it. And when Jesus does not give him the answer that he really wants, notice what the Gospel says: *But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"* The lawyer is living in a worldly transactional view which says "I follow the law and do all the right things, and in return, I will get eternal life at the end."

We must know that the lawyer asked Jesus the right question about eternal life, but without realising that he was speaking to the very author of Life itself. And Jesus did not tell him directly that He is eternal life and the way to eternal life. Jesus wanted the lawyer, as well as us, to work out for ourselves how to inherit eternal life. If we only do good and "go, do likewise", without Jesus Christ, how can we inherit eternal life?

But Jesus, who respects the Scriptures of His people, refers the lawyer to what he, being a lawyer, must know – the Mosaic Law.

Jesus turns the lawyer's challenge around to show that God's sovereignty extends over one's whole life not just reading and knowing the law. Believing in Jesus as the source of eternal life, by loving God, your neighbour, and yourself, characterises someone who is already living life in the eternal Kingdom.

The lawyer finds a stumbling block in the last part, "*and your neighbour as yourself"* and asks the question: *"Who is my neighbour?"* Which is connected with his question, *"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"* Jesus told him the story of the Good Samaritan and Jesus asked the lawyer a question: Who do you think is the neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?

For the Jews, there was no question. The Law was good; it was a delight. (Psalm 1) For them, the law came from God, not from human beings, and God's commands could not be subject to argument. They demanded all the heart, all the soul, all the might. For centuries, the struggle to observe the Law kept the people of Israel and Judah focused on the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. The prophets in their midst, reaching the highest understanding of God, recognised that obedience was the best sacrifice one could offer to God. Still, the struggle to observe the fine detail of the Law continued. The outward observance of the Law was always more straightforward and certainly more obvious to those who watched

others in order to judge them. And the people who paid attention to appearances were content to think of themselves as righteous. Jesus confronted and challenged this through his healing on the Sabbath and his teaching in parables, as well as by claiming to be who He was, the Son of God.

And I think that most, if not all of us, most of the time, are like the lawyer. We get caught up in ourselves. We want to justify ourselves to our family and friends, and often ourselves. Trying to convince everyone that we are okay, have done enough good, and will inherit eternal life.

In fact, we don't do good to earn something. We help because, in doing so through Jesus Christ, in showing love to our neighbour, we experience the eternal life of God's kingdom here and now. The action of loving our neighbour brings the kingdom of God into being.

That is why Jesus teaches the parable. To give the lawyer a chance to grow from his transactional view of the world of earning eternal life one day, to a relational view of the world of the in-breaking of the kingdom of God here and now.

As Christians, we know that doing good is the fruit of our Christian life, because Jesus' life is in us. We are very familiar with the parable of the "Good Samaritan," and we all know that it is part of our natural Christian life to do as the "Good Samaritan" did for others who are in need. This is because eternal life has already been implanted in us through our belief in Jesus Christ as our Saviour.

It is like Fr. Robert's comments on today's sermon's topic of "eternal life", in our discussion, he said:

"Eternal life is not just what happens after we die. Eternal life is something that is happening now and passing on our lives that are full of the presence of God, and the joy of the Lord. We experience lots of things, and we do them if we do them in the joy of God's creation, and we enjoy those as they are full. That is an aspect of eternal life, here, now. So, being able to appreciate what we have now and to enjoy it to its fullest is part of already being at the beginning of participating in eternal life."

To inherit eternal life is not some prize we win at the end of our lives, but a way of living and being with God, His creation, and our neighbours now. Eternal life can only be inherited through Jesus Christ and believing in Him. Our neighbour is absolutely anyone in need. And the doing of the good comes through our belief in Him, Jesus Christ, who wisely gives us this wonderful parable.