We have heard this morning St Mark’s story of the rich young man (Mark 10:17-32). Mark adds a small phrase not found in the other gospels that Jesus looks steadily at the young man and loves him. Matthew and Luke also have the story and many of the same details: for example the young man’s question ‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’ They also have Jesus’ answer, which is based on the second table of the Decalogue against murder, adultery, theft, perjury, fraud and dishonouring of parents. And all three gospels have then the young man’s question ‘All of this I have done? What more must I do?’

And it is in response to this question, according to Mark, that Jesus looked at him and loved him. His heart went out to him, maybe because he sensed the longing in the young man to do something big and great, the offering of his whole life, but maybe too he sensed the tragic difficulty the young man would face and felt tenderly for him. For Jesus says in answer to the question, what more must I do ‘Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor and you have treasure in heaven and come follow me’. The young man cannot, he goes away sad, for he had great wealth.

This mention of love is one of four mentions in Mark; the other three all referring to the Father’s love for Jesus his Son; this is the only time in the first three gospels Jesus is directly referred to as having love for someone. I think this passage suggests that God’s love for us is not so much based on who we are and the qualities we possess, which is largely what kindles our human loves, but on what we might become. There are wonderful images in Christian art, a good example would be the stone carvings on the west front of Orvieto Cathedral or the wall paintings in St Agatha’s church in Richmond, North Yorkshire, of God creating Adam: in them it is Christ, the angel of God, shaping Adam according to his own image and likeness. It is what he may become that is emphasised, what he may yet regain, all the bitter disappointment of sin notwithstanding, that terrible turning away, like the young man turning away from Christ. The turning away need not be the end of the story.
Meanwhile St Peter has been standing, watching and pondering. The time comes for his question: ‘What about us?’ he asks. What about us, who are not like the disappointing rich young man, who was loved in vain. ‘We have left everything and followed you’. It sounds rather ‘three cheers for us’. Jesus is very generous but he warns too: those who leave everything for his sake will be repaid a hundredfold, the rich yield of the seed fallen in the good soil. But again only in Mark there is the warning: it will not be without persecutions. It will not be without difficulties and obstacles and indeed as in Peter’s case, apparently tragic failures, at least as sad as the rich young man walking away.

Peter’s question suggests that his generous self-giving and his achieving of salvation is all in the past and in the future just the reward. But his future was to be blighted by his denial. When we think we have given our all, perhaps we have only just begun and perhaps, most likely indeed, there is to be a fall ahead. The work is never our work so much as God’s gift: ‘For you it is impossible, but not for God; because everything is possible for God’. Here we are, you and I, here at this Offering, the men and women we are, not always so loveable. And here God is, the God he is in this Offering, loving us into the men and women only he can make us to be.