

Feasting and Famished – The Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man

The Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man isn't one on which I've previously had the pleasure of preaching. It's a parable that is often ignored. And you can imagine why. It may be due to uneasiness with the fact that the parable appears to be affirming a 'reversal of roles' solution to the problem of the justice of God. The story seems to be saying: 'Life is unfair. But, never mind, God will 'even things up' in the next life'. Lazarus had a hard time here – and, as a result, he will enjoy good times in heaven. The rich man had a good life on earth and will therefore automatically spend eternity in hell. Put bluntly, the parable would then mean, 'If you are comfortable here, hell awaits you. If you are homeless here, heaven is guaranteed.' So, for obvious reasons, not a parable that many vicars look forward to seeing in the Lectionary. '*Oh heck, what am I going to say about this one*', is a thought no doubt common on the Saturday night!

But, all is not lost, as the day before I sat down to write this sermon (*before my holiday*), I'd just returned from a 2-day conference on preaching where one of the speakers – the New Testament scholar Paula Gooder – had lectured superbly on preaching and the parables. So, what could I learn from what she had to say? In thinking about what parables actually are, she began by quoting from an American New Testament theologian called Klyne Snodgrass who suggests that we should think of parables as '*imaginary gardens but with real toads in them*.' What he means of course, is that parables are completely made up stories, but that there's some real stuff, some real truth in there.

So, the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man isn't a real one – phew! - but what are the truths that Jesus wants to convey in his telling of it?

It helps if we know to whom the parable was directed – who the first hearers would have been – and where the parable comes in Luke's gospel. In short, what is its context? Well, it comes directly after the Parable of the Shrewd Manager, last week's gospel passage, in which Jesus concludes that '*No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money*.' With a resurrection story, Jesus was no doubt aiming his words at the Sadducees, who claimed there was no resurrection from the dead, and also the Pharisees, who he says '*loved money*'. It's as if Jesus says, '*Now, let me tell you*

a story of two people; one served God and the other money, and let's see what you make of it. Make yourselves comfortable, you're gonna need it!

And he begins. *'There was a rich man who dressed himself in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day'*. Two things we need to learn from this: the fine linen refers to quality Egyptian cotton used for the best underwear so, in addition to fine cloaks, this chap wears posh pants! And secondly, by feasting sumptuously every day, this man didn't observe the Sabbath. His servants were never given a day of rest, and he therefore publicly violated the Ten Commandments every week. His self-indulgent lifestyle was *everything* to him, more important than the law of God.

And what of Lazarus? *'At his gate a poor man named Lazarus was laid, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table'*. Lying outside the gate of the rich man was laid a sick, hungry, neglected beggar. Two things we need to know about this: Lazarus is the *only* individual with a name in all Jesus' parables. Everyone else – the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the sower – are anonymous. Lazarus is the sole exception, and therefore his name must be significant. And it is, as the name Lazarus is a Hebrew word that means *'the one whom God helps.'* Secondly, too sick to walk there himself, Lazarus was laid by others, presumably by family and friends, outside the rich man's gate. The only man in town with the resources necessary to meet his medical needs *was* the rich man, so this was where he was laid, in the hope that the rich man or his guests would feel some compassion and give Lazarus something. This remains a common practice in the East today, with beggars gathered outside mosques for noon prayers each Friday and outside churches each Sunday morning.

The gate at which Lazarus lay was certainly within earshot of the daily sumptuous banquets of the rich man. Only a few feet from Lazarus a group of overfed men reclined each day, while he lay hungry and in pain, listening to their conversations. Those same men passed him every day as they entered and left the rich man's house. They didn't need the food – he did. But, whereas scraps would have been tossed to the dogs, there to guard the property, none fell to Lazarus.

The parable continues: *'The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side'*. Too poor for a funeral, but angels transported him to heaven, where Abraham threw a party – maybe a sumptuous banquet - to welcome him. How will the rich man respond to a party in honour of Lazarus?

'The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.' The dramatic tension between the rich man and Lazarus continues in the afterlife; a tension which is critical to what the parable is about. To the reader's surprise, the rich man recognises Lazarus – he knows his name. So, the rich man *knew* that Lazarus was at his gate and was aware of his circumstances. Surely now the rich man, having found himself in hell, seeing Lazarus honoured by Abraham, will apologise to the former beggar and ask his forgiveness.

But no. The story goes on: *'And he called out 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I'm in agony in this fire.'* Note, he doesn't speak to Lazarus; clearly Lazarus is still well beneath him. He plays his 'racial card' – he has the blood of Abraham in his veins, and Abraham is the patriarch of his clan. Of course Abraham will help. Family is everything in the Middle East. And he's one of the family.

But what an unbelievable demand! When Lazarus was in pain, he was ignored by the rich man. Now the rich man is in pain, something must be done about it – immediately! Instead of an apology he demands services, and from the very man he refused to help in spite of his great wealth.

Those who are listening to the parable are electrified. The tables are turned: Lazarus is in a position of power, reclining beside a man of great influence – no less than Abraham himself! How will Lazarus respond to being treated as a servant and asked to relieve the pain of a man who unceasingly ignored his suffering? The listener might well expect him to explode in anger and rage. But Lazarus is quiet. As quiet as he was each day as he laid outside the rich man's gate, hoping for mercy but receiving none. A model of the mercy described by Jesus and recorded by Luke with the words: *'But love your enemies, and do good, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great.'*

As the story continues, all eyes are focused on Abraham to see how he will respond to this insensitive request. And here it comes: *'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us'.* Abraham doesn't deny that the rich man is a member of his extended family – 'Son' or 'My boy' is how he addresses him – but he then voices the classical cry

of the prophets throughout history when calling on the people of Israel to repent and turn back to God – he uses the word *'remember'*. *'Remember that God gave good things to you, but remember how you in turn passed on evil things to Lazarus, lying helpless at your gate.'* The situation is now reversed, and hey, it's permanent. Lazarus is reclining at the banquet with Abraham and the one wanting to join the party can't get there. Ever!

But the rich man is not done yet: *'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment'*. If Lazarus cannot be used as a table waiter, he can surely be turned into an errand boy to serve the interests of his superiors, the rich man and his brothers. Still no hint of repentance or apology. But it's not to be. The Law and the Prophets called for compassion for the poor – his brothers could learn all they need to from the scriptures but, like the rich man, this is unlikely. Even a visitation from a dead man in the form of Lazarus won't make an ounce of difference. They've already made their beds, and in time, will come to lie in them. And the story is over.

This parable however raises key questions. What does God wish of us? What does he expect of the wealthy? How does he long for us to treat one another, especially those in great need? And how will he evaluate what we do with our lives? Whilst our passage from Luke is a parable, a story, an imaginary garden – remember that it does indeed have real toads! It depicts a tragic and serious reality. We are *all* children of God, *made* in his image, to *reflect* his image. If we love God, we must respond compassionately to his call to treat others sensitively, in a way that we ourselves would want to be treated.

Just before we went away, an example of this was going viral on various social networks. A young lad called Michael, of about 14, in Memphis, Tennessee, joined a new school, but was being bullied by his classmates for wearing the same clothes and trainers since the start of the school year because his mum couldn't afford new ones. Two other pupils, popular boys in the school football team, saw what was happening and decided to do something. Kristopher and Antwann went through their closets and found items they could give to their classmate. What has gone viral is a clip (filmed discreetly by another classmate) of the boys giving new clothes and trainers to a visibly stunned Michael in one of the school's corridors. Well, the clip has been viewed by millions, including Ellen DeGeneres, the chat show host, and Will Smith, the famous actor. Ellen invited all three boys onto her show where they were

surprised by an appearance by Will Smith bearing gifts from his brand new clothes range – they will be the first to wear them, and \$10,000 each from Ellen. I loved what Will Smith had to say to Kristopher and Antwann. Kristopher had initially been part of the group of boys who were taunting Michael but he then ‘self-corrected’ and took himself away – away to do something constructive. Will Smith commended the boys for doing something that was ‘*human*’ – what any one of us should be prepared to do, particularly with God in our DNA. Each of us a child of God, made in his image to witness to his love to the world. It’s remarkable how our children are teaching us such important messages at the moment about what it is to be human. So, as we leave here today and start our week, how can each of us reach out to those in need, in our own context, and show the world what it is to be simply human? Children of God, loved by God, ready to share that love with others.

Let’s pray:

Lord, we don’t think of ourselves as high and mighty.

We don’t think of ourselves as rich.

It doesn’t occur to us to think of ourselves as privileged.

But, we often moan.

When we do, it’s because we’ve stopped looking around us.

Mired in self-interest, we see only our own worlds.

Help us to look beyond our bubbles.

Burst our bubbles; open our eyes; make us aware.

And from awareness, awake action, we pray. In Jesus’ name, Amen.