

Sermon on Luke 16:19-31 - The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

Lord God, our heavenly Father, speak to us in your spirit of truth, compassion, and justice. That we may hear your message to us today. Amen.

How often do you read a story about the gross inequality in the world, and you feel your blood begin to boil. You find yourself thinking: 'someone should do something about it!'

Well, Luke felt the same. The theme of injustice and unfair distribution of money and possessions is central to his Gospel and the Book of Acts.

We find it in the Magnificat, when Mary says that her Lord sends the rich away empty. We see it in the humble turtledove that Mary and Joseph bring as a sacrifice when they present Jesus to the temple. And we see it in the stark teachings of Jesus about rich and poor, in particular the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6.

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is not complicated, but it is difficult to hear, because rich and poor are not vague generalities, but depicted as two very real worlds.

The question is which one do we belong to?

On the one hand, we have a rich man who has no name. By being unnamed, he could be any one of us. He becomes a silent reproach, a mirror to hold up. Day after day, the rich man sees a poor man on his doorstep and ignores him. The poor man has a name, he is Lazarus. In fact, he is the only character in a parable who does have a name. His name makes his condition very real. And why is he so poor? The story suggests that it is because the rich man has not lived his life according to the Law and the prophets.

The prophets have strong words for those who cause poverty and neglect the poor. Remember the words of the prophet Amos: 'The Lord said: 'you women of Samaria are fat cows! You ill-treat and abuse the poor and needy, then you say to your husbands, Bring us more drinks!'

Jesus makes the point that Lazarus would not have been destitute if the rich man had lived according to the Law. Lazarus would not have lost his land, no doubt swallowed up into the rich man's estate because of debt. If the rich man had lived justly and had shared some of his wealth with Lazarus, the poor man would not be begging for crumbs.

This might seem like a faraway depiction of the world, but let's think about it for a moment. Let's think about crops and food. A huge number of us love chocolate. The chocolate market in this country represents some 3.5 billion pounds per year. And that's just one country. So why aren't cocoa farmers rich? Exploitation, greed, negligence, shareholders' interests, injustice... The list is long.

So there we have it, two very different worlds, that of the rich and that of the poor, but just when two lives are as far apart as they can possibly be, there is a shift: the men die. And much like the funnel of an hourglass, all the sand of time is drawn from one side to the other in a great reversal of fortunes.

On the one side, Lazarus is in the arms of Abraham, as a child protected by a loving mother. He is fed, safe, and warm. On the other side of the chasm is the rich man, tormented in the low place, left to gaze hungrily.

And what is really sad is that the rich man is none the wiser for his death experience! He's still acting like a little king! 'Come now, Abraham, send Lazarus to me, I'm thirsty!' And then he is anxious for his brothers. Someone must tell them to change their lives,

otherwise, they'll end up like him! So he asks Abraham: 'Send Lazarus to my brothers, let him warn them!' 'Too late,' says Abraham. 'Your brothers, they know Moses and the prophets, just like you do. They have been warned. It's their responsibility to listen and to respond!'

Luke is telling us we can help, guide, support, but every servant of God must find the Way for themselves. People have been given what they need to live faithful lives. They will listen, or they will not. They will respond, or they will not.

We find that same message relayed by Paul in his letter to Timothy: beware the traps of money and comfort, he says. The love of money leads to all kinds of evil: harm, ruin, destitution. You are a man of God, he tells his apprentice. Therefore pursue what is of God, and that is righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. If you live in God's values, Paul says, you live a life that is truly life.

A life that is truly life.

Our passages from Scripture today describe two lives, two worlds that are on either side of an invisible door. Which world are we in? I want to suggest that we are in the world of the rich man's brothers.

We live in a great divide, created by boundaries and walls that we have drawn, perhaps not so much between us and others as between us and God. We have what we need to get closer to God, we have God's Word and we have each other, we support each other in the faith.

But how will we choose to respond? Who is this Christ that we are called to follow? Well, Jesus tells us he is Lazarus, he is the one lying at our door hungry – will we feed him? He is the thirsty one – will we give him a drink? He is the vulnerable one – will we give him clothes, warmth, and reassurance? Jesus is the one imprisoned and cut off from 'decent' society. He is the marginalized one that we can easily walk by.

In Revelation, chapter 3, an angel is sent to the church in Laodicea, and he says: 'You say that you are rich and you don't need a thing, but you are pitiful and naked. Those I love, I rebuke. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. Whoever has ears let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

It is God's Christ who stands at our door, knocking. When we answer, we may not find someone who

looks like us, but if we are paying attention, we may very well find someone who looks like our God.

Let us pray:

Loving God,
thank you that it is never too late to do your will.

Every day is a new chance to serve you,
to love others and to be the people you made us to be.

Thank you for forgiving us when we get it wrong.

Thank you for being ever willing to begin again.

This winter, more than ever,
may we dispense kind words and generous actions.

May we be known for an attitude of love,
that honours you and all you have made.

Amen.