

THE TEXT:

LUKE 16:19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

²⁵ "But Abraham replied, '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. ²⁶ 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.'

²⁷ "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

²⁹ "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

³⁰ "No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

³¹ "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

SERMON

In recent weeks we've had some beautiful stories Jesus told to teach us how the Kingdom of God is graciously at work in the world. Luke's collation of the short stories of Jesus continues with today's Gospel reading, with a story often referred to as 'The rich man and Lazarus.' It is introduced abruptly, is more complex than the others, and how God is at work in the world does not seem as readily apparent in this story as in the others.

We are immediately introduced to the character of the rich man. He is dressed in purple. We might picture a long flowing robe of luxurious material. Purple is the colour of royalty, suggesting he is a regal figure. He lives in luxury, feasting in comfort. This would normally be reserved for special occasions, but this rich man has the capacity for excessive merrymaking on a daily basis. He's in the league of Steve Jobs, Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos!

On the completely opposite end of the spectrum is Lazarus. We are told that he has been laid at the rich man's gate, but the original Greek is far harsher: he has been *dumped* there. He has been cast out from the community, regarded as a blight on society; an imposition for whom nobody has responsibility. He has probably never had a cent to his name. Rather than being clothed in fine linen he is covered in sores. He is a beggar who must rely on others' help simply to survive. Lying there in distress he has no way of concealing his shame. The situation is so pathetic that the household dogs add to Lazarus' humiliation by licking his sores. Lazarus is so helpless he is not even able to keep these dogs away. The name 'Lazarus' means "The one whom God helps." But divine help doesn't seem to be there, at least now according to how we would expect to see it. We might think that God has abandoned Lazarus, and that the rich man is favoured by God.

The story continues with a picture of life after death for both characters. There is a sudden turn—a reversal: while the rich man enjoyed luxurious life on earth to excess, he finds himself in torment in hell, while Lazarus, who was so impoverished in his earthly life later received riches in heaven.

The point of this parable isn't that it is necessarily wrong to be wealthy, or that the rich in this life will be punished and be made poor in the next. Although the story pictures torment in hell and joy in heaven, it is not primarily intended to teach about what happens after we die, either. Jesus' core concern is to cause us to reflect on what our attitude to God is *now*. Where are our hearts in relation to God *now*?

Before today's text are these verses (Luke 16:14-15): "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money,

heard all these things, and they ridiculed Jesus. And he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, *but God knows your hearts*. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God”.

The rich man in our text must have seen Lazarus at his gate every day, yet he didn't lift a finger or spend a cent in order to relieve his pain or give him food. He is so blinded by his own self-absorption and self-interest that he doesn't even seem to know Lazarus is there. And even after they both die, he has the audacity to demand Lazarus be his servant and fetch him some water. Could it be possible to be any more arrogant and expecting privileged treatment than this?! The 18th Century Scottish preacher and author Thomas Guthrie once said: “The selfish person has a heart that, like a man's coffin, is just his own measure—long enough and broad enough comfortably to hold him with no room for anyone else.”

The rich man's attitude to Lazarus revealed where his heart was with God—distant, disinterested, and uncaring. What about our hearts? The last Sunday in September has historically had a community care focus, and so perhaps today's text prompts our conscience to think about where our hearts are before God, by how we regard others. Who are those laid at our gates, dumped by the world as insignificant and unworthy of love and care? Like the rest of the world do we hustle them on, without the bread they need, and without their need for the Bread of life, Jesus?

Today's parable is a warning to us also, to not be so consumed with the things of this world that we lose sight of Jesus and his will that we care for those around us. It means our faith in the God who loves us so much will show itself in loving concern for all people, looking on those who are poor and marginalised through the eyes of Christ. It means realising that we are the daily bread that others pray for; that we have been given hands to serve and mouths to proclaim the hope of Christ to our Western world so trapped by materialism, just like the rich man in our text.

Yet this is still not the gospel in today's Gospel reading. God's call for us to look beyond ourselves to care for the needs of others is central to the Gospel of Luke—but it's actually only more law.

Where is the gospel in our Gospel reading? It is God's heart for us.

It wasn't just the rich man's heart that was far from God. It was when Adam and Eve's hearts were far from God, and they refused to listen to him, that they brought sin into the world, fixing a huge chasm of human making between the divine and the mortal. Since then, the natural condition of the whole human race is one of self-centredness and disregard for others. Our hearts were far from God. *But his heart was not far from us.*

When the rich man begs for his brothers to be warned so as to avoid eternal torment, the reply comes: “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.” ‘Moses’ here means the first five books of the bible, and ‘the Prophets’ all of those who spoke God's word before the coming of Jesus. ‘Moses and the Prophets’ is shorthand for the scriptures at that time—the Old Testament.

It is through Moses and the Prophets that God showed his heart for the world; wanting us to know of his love. If we were God, any of us would have probably written off an ungrateful people that had just turned their nose up at us so snobbishly. But not God. He shows the depth of his love and grace for even those who reject him. It was just after Adam and Eve sinned that he promised a Saviour, proclaiming to Satan that one who would come and defeat him and liberate the world from his power: “He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” (Genesis 3:15).

Then God gathered a people for himself. He promised Abraham that he would have innumerable descendants, from whom would come the Christ. Abraham believed God and God reckoned it to Abraham as righteousness. God brought his people of old into a land he gave them for their own and dwelt in their midst with his divine favour and grace. And he promised them “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of slavery, out of the house of Egypt.” God saved and blessed a

people for his own *before he even gave them his commandments.*

God's relationship with humankind has always been by grace, never the law—something the Pharisees to whom Jesus spoke never understood. And even when they repeatedly broke God's law and idolised other things, and even themselves, like Adam and Eve of old—replacing God's own word with their own to make themselves feel righteous—God sent the prophets to call his people back to him, time and time again, to seek the Lord while he may be found and to call on him while he is near, because he wanted to restore and bless them.

Abraham and all of God's people would not be counted righteous because of their religious performance, their good works, or their external appearance, as the Pharisees thought. And they didn't have a ticket to God's favour because of their biological ancestry. And a person's wealth doesn't indicate whether or not they are God's favoured people. All those who trust in what God says are his righteous people. It is by listening to God's word that enables one to escape God's eternal punishment, and especially the promise of salvation by grace through faith in the Saviour.

This is Jesus himself, the greater Moses, the chief Prophet. He is the one who bridged the chasm between God and humanity, when he came all the way from heaven to earth. Though he was rich, he became poor for our sakes, as a vulnerable embryo in his mother's womb, born as a tiny baby in a stable full of muck. As the King of kings, Jesus also wore a purple robe, like the rich man in our text. But it was given to him in mockery, placed on him by soldiers, who also put on him a crown of thorns and said "Hail, King of the Jews!" Jesus was treated like Lazarus, when he became the undesirable One, shamed in public view. It was Jesus who was dumped, abandoned, left to die, by his own Father, and he prayed from the Cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me" (Psalm 22:1, 16). He was covered in sores from being flogged, and rather than feasting on extravagant fare he was offered vinegar on a sponge, before being left to die.

After Jesus did this for you, he bridged the chasm of time and space from his crucifixion to your life. How does this story show how the Kingdom of God goes to work in the world? In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Hebrews 1). God goes to work as Jesus speaks through his word. He who spoke 200 billion galaxies into being spoke into existence a new reality for you, when he joined you to him in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps at the moment you feel afflicted, tossed to and fro by the storms of life, or condemned by the devil, or abandoned by others or even God. Perhaps it feels like you are covered in sores; hurt by the sins of others. Or perhaps it is literal physical affliction. Perhaps you feel all alone in your troubles, or a guilty conscience bears upon you heavily.

These things are not a sign that God has dumped you at the gate. For not only do you have Moses and the Prophets, but you also have the one who they point to and are fulfilled by: Jesus. Those who simply trust in him are his Father's favoured people, despite life's circumstances.

See today that this is true for you. As you come forward, you approach the font, which reminds you that through Holy Baptism you belong to Jesus, who crossed the chasm between heaven and earth for you, to wash away all your guilt and clothe you in his own royal robe of righteousness. Just beyond the font is the sanctuary rail, which would actually be a barrier separating sinners from the presence of the Holy God—if it were not for the open space in the middle—signifying that Jesus has opened the way to his Father's heavenly sanctuary to you, and that you have personal access to his Father's blessings. And as you come, Jesus places in your hands his holy and precious body and blood, to bring forgiveness life and salvation, and to assure those who eat and drink in faith have a place of honour at the heavenly feast to come. Amen!