



Revd Ro's Reflection on The 15th Sunday after Trinity Proper 21 Year C

1 Timothy 6.6-19

Luke 16.19-31

The story of the rich man and Lazarus (the poor man) is very famous, and illustrates the danger of riches corrupting those who possess them. If we stop to think of the image it is doubtful we will think of the 'rich man in his castle the poor man at his gate' rather we will picture the down and out, the poor who sit in our streets especially in the big cities. Actually that is a good illustration to help us understand this story.

The rich man, who is unnamed, simply doesn't even notice Lazarus, he is not part of his consciousness.

¹⁹ 'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.'

The rich man is too concerned with himself, eating, drinking and making merry with his friends. It appears that even the dogs show pity on Lazarus while the rich man is totally unconcerned. He is self-absorbed, he has fallen into the trap Jesus warned against, and money has become his god, his idol. He worships it because it can buy him the good life here on earth. That's the key, it might do now, but that is ephemeral. He will die and his money means nothing then. The famous saying which appears in our epistle reading; ⁷ 'for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it;' is very apt. So the rich man has everything he needs or so it appears but at his death the terrible truth hits home.

He, as with all of us, will have to give an account of our lives. He has done nothing to help anyone, he has been entirely self-centred and the rest of humanity, apart from his cronies, mattered not at all. He is quite happy to let people suffer so long as he doesn't. Actually he is like the Pharisees who are a rich privileged class who are only concerned with the poor in that they have power over them.

Or like the leader of the synagogue who told the sick to go away and come on another day not the Sabbath, their suffering simply didn't matter to him.

Jesus is the opposite of this of course, he came to all humanity, he was born in poverty and he lived on the margins, he came to people like the poor man Lazarus and he healed them. He bound up their sores and he turned their lives around; and, as restored in body and mind, they turned to him and followed him. Jesus is found so often with the sick, the poor, the sinners, those on the margins. Yet the rich and the powerful, those in control, condemn him for it; after all they are beyond the pale, it's us that have it right with God they think. Of course they have it completely wrong, they are blind to the truth and are determined not to see. Their callous attitude condemns the vast majority of humanity as unimportant. The rich man in the story is not given a name because he is representative of all who have this kind of mind-set.

It is only after death when his phoney world has disintegrated that he sees the truth. Jesus is telling the story to illustrate this, to jolt those who are rich and powerful out of their callous complacency and often cruelty. With some of course they just don't see the poor, they are beyond their notice, like the poor man who sits on a street corner while people ignore his existence. It reminds me so much of the poem, 'When Jesus came to Birmingham,' which illustrates the couldn't care less attitude of those who are blind not only to suffering but to God.

'Still Jesus cried, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do," And still it rained the wintry rain that drenched Him through and through; The crowds went home, and left the streets without a soul to see, And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.'

This is the point here, the rich man asks for help for himself, which is impossible, it's too late now so then in desperation he begs for his family. Let Lazarus appear to my family to jolt them into the recognition of what might happen to them. As an aside I have often wondered if it was this story that prompted Dickens to write 'A Christmas Carol,' Scrooge is warned by the spirits just in time to see the error of his ways. Not so this man, so what about telling his family.

"Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment."²⁹ Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them."³⁰ He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent."³¹ He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." '

Note it is Abraham, the man who obeyed God, the founder of the Jewish nation who answers. The answer is simple, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." They have the teaching of the scriptures, again and again God emphasises the responsibility of caring for the poor and needy. The passage Jesus reads from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue at Nazareth is no accident; this is his commission it is ours too:

¹ 'The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;'

And indeed the Song of Mary which echoes this:

‘He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.’

Again and again God tells his people that love and compassion are central, but those in power have disregarded this. They, like the rich man here, are in grave danger because they are nowhere near God. In fact self-centred desires for riches and power have become their idols. Jesus stands before them offering hope, time is short, you unlike this man are not dead, and you still have a chance so turn from your old ways and recognise the truth of God in me. Jesus is saying that he is the Messiah; he is the fulfilment of the law given by God to Moses and the scriptures. God will create a new heaven and a new earth. Will they be a part of it or will they follow the old ways and be lost? Tragically so many of them simply rejected him and rejected the chance he offered. So many could not change but carried on as the rich man in the story. This story is not saying it’s ok to be complacent because you can say it will be alright for the poor when they die. That is rubbish. All are called but it is up to us, rich or poor, to turn to Jesus, get rid of the shackles that bind us to our old habits and walk in the new way, the way of Jesus. It’s not just paying lip service either; it’s living it out every day of our lives. It means doing our best to follow him, we are all fallible of course we are, but we must do our best, Jesus utterly condemned those who said one thing and did another, who preached holiness while living a life of hypocrisy. The fact is as the story illustrates, you might fool others, even yourselves but God knows the truth, not only of our acts but of our motivation.

Our epistle reading begins with the words I quoted earlier,

⁶ ‘Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷ for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸ but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.

Paul is illustrating the Christian life, he is speaking to Timothy and he knows the trouble that can beset a church, a family or any community. Jealousy, arguments and a thirst for power or money are the things that corrupt and where they hold sway then disintegration or oppression will follow. The fact is if you have enough to live on, be content and do not keep wanting more and more material possessions. Those who do are in danger of ending up like the rich man in the story

⁹ ‘But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.’

The metaphor at the end is very, very forceful. People desire these things but the result of putting money as a god always ends in catastrophe for the person or community. Just think of the crimes that we read about that have at their heart the motive of money. Notice the words used, ‘temptation’ and ‘trapped.’ A person is lured away from the right path and once they embark on it, it acts like some drug and they are trapped, ensnared and can’t get out of this way of life. Having money is never enough; there is the desire to make more. It’s a bit like a hamster on a wheel, a

desperate chase which is actually meaningless. There is also another grave danger, if money is your idol that is all in all and your faith is secondary or becomes meaningless. Paul is saying many have given up their new found faith because they prefer to do their own thing rather than to obey Jesus; because their faith in God has been replaced by faith in other gods, material ones such as money and wealth.

Once again though we need to underline the words, ¹⁰ 'for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil,' Paul emphasises the word love. If you love something or someone they are your focus, your all in all and that is what you think about. Money must not be that. There is nothing wrong with money in itself, it is a manmade commodity that we all need in life and always have. There is nothing wrong with being rich either, some inherit wealth, some by legitimate hard work make it. It is a fine tool but a bad master. It is what you do with it and your attitude to it that is the key. Some of the world's richest people have been philanthropists and given millions to help causes or people. Our late Queen is a shining example of someone who had wealth in abundance but who was humble, caring, and who lived a Christ centred life of service, trying to follow in his footsteps day by day.

Now Paul turns his attention to what a Christ centred life is and how Christians should aspire to live, ¹¹ 'But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.'

This passage has of course inspired the famous hymn. A Christian must turn from the temptations of the world which often lead to misery and turn to the kingdom values. Notice the order, Godliness, faith, and love. Think of the commandments, 'Love God' and 'Love one another as I have loved you.' Jesus summed it up when he said, 'Do this and you will live,' Thinking about it, if we did, life would be so different, we would all be living the Christ life. Gentleness would rule, not cruelty, bullying or power-seeking. If we think of the fruits of the spirit, these should be our guide for life, these are the kingdom values which we should strive to live out on earth and which God will establish at his renewed Creation when Christ will rule. This is what Paul is talking about when he writes,

¹³ 'In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will bring about at the right time.'

This is our commission, to keep his commandments and to live in his way. Jesus was not afraid but in front of his accuser told the truth without fear, we must do the same. This commission is in no way parochial or just within our little units, Jesus came to all people, and he died to bring salvation for all. We have his commandment to care for others, to show genuine compassion and concern. We must not pass by on the other side but live out his way of love. Part of that is of course forgiveness, to forgive others is hard but it is his way, that does not mean we condone what is wrong, that is not what Jesus did but he did forgive.

'he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen'

It is important to remember this in a society which was governed by status and hierarchy; it still is now to an extent. Then it was the emperor who was seen as a god. Emperor worship was well and truly established and no expense or pomp would be spared when he emerged, everything was done to overawe the subjects. The sign of loyalty was to say, 'Caesar is Lord,' if you didn't that was

treason. Christians wouldn't do that and many paid the price for their loyalty to Jesus. They confessed Jesus as the only Lord. Look at what Paul says, Jesus is Lord over all the Kings and princes and the whole world. He is not saying kings don't exist or we should revolt. He is saying Jesus is supreme and is ruler over all; he was in the beginning with God, co-creator of all. Yet we remember it was Jesus who was the example of utmost humility. So then Paul ends by stressing the need for following Christ's example,

¹⁷ 'As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.'

Paul is not leading a rebellion against society; he is championing Christ's teaching and values. Of course there are rich people. But think of Paul's letter to Philemon. He was a man of wealth, he has a runaway slave Onesimus, the lowest of the low in that society, but the great leveller is that they are both Christians. Philemon is to act according to the teachings of Jesus in love to his brother. He must remember as we must that all are equal in the sight of God, all are precious and loved, and all are co-heirs with Christ and receive the grace of God through Jesus. If a person is rich then they must use their wealth responsibly and do good with it, share and help people and be glad they have the resources which enable them to do that. What will be judged is how we live our lives, how we behave to others. Our love of God must be shown in Christian action. That day of renewed creation will come in God's time, Jesus will return as ruler of all. Until then it is our commission to live our lives according to the kingdom values and to follow Jesus' way of love.

Run the straight race through God's good grace, lift up thine eyes and seek his face; life with its way before us lie; Christ is the path and Christ the prize. John Samuel Bewley Monsell

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