

Sermon - The Rich Man and Lazarus (20-3-22)

Luke 16: 19-31

If you're living on the street, you choose your pitch carefully. Somewhere close to those with money and plenty to spare. A place where there is a decent footfall, a steady stream of people who might help. Relatives of the householder, for example, who were just as well off and might be persuaded to part with a few coins. Lazarus had carefully positioned himself, or been carried there perhaps, because of the sores on his legs, at the gate of a rich man. Lying there in the heat of the day with only dogs for company. Lazarus – his name means “He whom God helps” – although it didn't seem as if God was helping him. Not until he died and was lifted out of his misery by angels who carried him straight to heaven.

On the other side of the gate, it was a very different story. In fact you might say there was a great chasm between Lazarus and the man who lived in the big house. He wasn't just a little bit rich, he was rolling in it. He dressed in purple and fine linen: only the rich could afford clothes dyed with this expensive colour, so it was quite a status symbol. He feasted sumptuously every day. No fast days for him. He could afford the choicest of foods. He wiped his hands on pieces of bread and threw them away, but never in the direction of Lazarus. Even if he had, the dogs would have got there first.

But as the saying goes, “You can't take it with you”. When he dies, he no longer has the cushion of luxury to protect him. His material goods are gone, and he finds himself in a godless place with no-one to help, whilst seeing Lazarus in heaven at the side of Abraham. Yes, he recognises Lazarus. That beggar who used to sit at his gate. The man he treated with such indifference and lack of care. Does he show any sign of remorse or repentance? Not a bit of it. The joke is that even after death he is still ordering people around. “Tell Lazarus to come and give me some relief won't you, Father Abraham?”

But that's not possible. Not now. The great chasm that existed while they were both alive continues.

Just before this story, Jesus has been talking about the impossibility of worshipping both God and money. If the rich man had shown any sign of worshipping God and trying to live in a way that pleases him, he would have known that God requires us to have mercy, to do justly and to walk humbly. Mercy saves, not only the person being shown mercy, but it saves the merciful person too, at the very least from a self-centred existence.

Zachaeus was a rich man, but he repented and his life was changed forever. But this rich man is used to putting himself first and he recognises that his brothers live the same sort of life, so they must be warned. But that's not possible. Not now. They have Moses and the Prophets; they know what God commands.

But God's kingdom is demanding. Whether we are rich or not, God asks us to have compassion, to love our neighbour, even if it costs us.

So, who is the rich man? Who would feature in this parable if Jesus were telling it to us? Parables are flexible. They stretch to fit all sorts of circumstances and in every age. I'm sure Jesus would use inclusive language, so it wouldn't be the rich man, or the rich woman..... how about the Rich Consumer male or female? Certainly the rich man was a consumer – he had all the best food, and the finest clothes. Today, he would probably have a private jet. Or maybe not. It depends how you define riches. Perhaps he or she would just be someone who expected:

- a certain standard of living, with a regular rise in salary
- a good diet with plenty of variety with products from all over the world, so that she can be as healthy as possible

- a wardrobe full of clothes, and if they can be bought cheaply so much the better because then it's no concern if she throws them away next year when fashions change
- must have a holiday, of course, preferably more than 2 or 3, somewhere in the sun where she can lie on the beach and forget about work
- and the most up-to-date laptop, tablet and phone so that she can check emails and send messages while she is away.

Now at this point you might be thinking "I wish . . ." Or you might think, "some of that sounds a bit like me".

And what's wrong with that, you might think. These are things many people either aspire to or take for granted in this country. Except that there is a big divide between the "haves" and the "have not's" and the way we live sometimes affects other people living across the other side of the world.

Where is Lazarus living today? Is he living in the streets of our towns and cities? Yes, but he's also the factory worker in Asia who works for a pittance so that we can buy cheap goods. Is he the child playing on polluted ground where the waste from richer countries has been illegally dumped? Or is she the African farmer whose land is so parched and dry that she can no longer grow crops and whose animals have died because of the drought caused by climate change, made worse by our air travel.

Is he the man who struggles to get to the health clinic because the roads have been washed away because of flooding? The problem for us, is that we now know about these things. You see, the Rich Man wasn't ignorant about Lazarus. He knew him, he even knew his name, but he didn't care. He turned a blind eye and didn't lift a finger to help him.

We now know that the way we have been living in this country has become, over the course of decades, more and more unsustainable and this is having a devastating effect on our brothers and sisters who live in less developed countries.

It's not easy. In fact, it's easier for a camel to drive a Rolls Royce, than for a rich consumer to go through the eye of a needle.

It's not easy because this is a big, complicated subject.

It's not easy because the rich consumer thinks he has a right to go on having more, and more. But who or what really satisfies us?

It's not easy because it challenges us to change our way of living. It's not easy because we can't see how we as individuals, can make any difference.

So why bother?

Why? Because we *are* listening to Moses and the prophets and we are listening to Jesus, who asks his disciples to build his kingdom here on earth and to love our neighbours whoever and wherever they are.

So, how would it be if we were not longing for more and more goods in our lives, but longing for more and more of God in our lives?

How would it be if we spoke out against injustice by the way we spend our money?

How would it be if we were to join with Christians up and down the country and across the world, who are acting to help the Lazarus's of our day and to make the world a fairer place.

Lazarus – he whom God helps. Could it be that God wants to help Lazarus through us?