

Scripture Reading for Sunday September 29th 2019

Deuteronomy 15:7-11 (NIV)

⁷ If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. ⁸ Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. ⁹ Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: “The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near,” so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. ¹⁰ Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. ¹¹ There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.

Luke 16:19-31 (NIV)

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 Hades, 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 set in place, 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 family, 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: God and Money

Having just heard the Lectionary reading for today, you might be wishing you stayed home this morning! This parable of the rich man and Lazarus makes us *all* feel very uncomfortable for two obvious reasons. First, on a global scale, we're *all* rich, even if we're not as wealthy as Jeff Bezos. Moreover, some of you may be thinking that the Treasurer and I are in the league, but I can assure you he had no idea what the reading was today when he gave me the Church's financial update. So please don't think that either of us is ganging up on you this morning and guilting you to give! As St. Paul says, "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."¹ And, having studied this parable, I'm confident that the reaction at the end was *not* for Christ's audience to pull out their cheque-books! More on that in a moment. Second, because we're all relatively rich, we feel uncomfortable because we wonder if the tormenting fires of hell will one day be licking at *our* heels! If you have been raised with hellfire sermons or with an unhealthy sense of Church guilt, then this parable will bring back unpleasant memories and feelings. So let me give you some comfort at the outset, Jesus is *not* teaching here about the *nature* of the afterlife.² That might surprise some of you; but that is *not* the purpose of this parable. Jesus is adapting a familiar rabbinical story and putting a new twist on it.³ In other words, he is using well-known Jewish imagery to make a different point, not unlike how Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* makes use of the genre of ghost stories to tell a serious exemplary tale. Nevertheless, this literary analogy does not negate the seriousness of our actions for today - or their consequences in the life to come.⁴ I hope this reassurance doesn't mean you'll instantly switch off, but that you will be curious as to what the story is all about.

Let's first set the scene, and this means is we have to consider all the Old Testament allusions since this is a *Jewish* story at heart. Luke tells us earlier that the Pharisees loved money⁵ and had overheard the Parable of the Shrewd Manager we considered last week,⁶ and were "sneering at Jesus."⁷ We are told Jesus then said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts."⁸ It is after this that Jesus begins his story with, "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day."⁹ The mention of "purple and fine linen" may

¹ 2 Cor 9:7.

² In other words, that it is a place of torment and torture for the unrighteous.

³ There are many rabbinical versions of this story, and some scholars say it is based on an earlier Egyptian tale. Consequently, Jesus was not the first to tell of how wealth and poverty might be reversed in the afterlife.

⁴ One implicit point that Jesus is making is clear: there *is* an afterlife, something the Sadducees of Jesus' day rejected.

⁵ In that context, also recall Luke 16:13. "No one can serve two masters . . . you cannot serve both God and money."

⁶ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/How-Much-More-.pdf>.

⁷ Luke 16:14.

⁸ Luke 16:15a. That God – (and Jesus too!) - knows our hearts/secrets/thoughts is a common theme in Luke.

⁹ Luke 16:19. The man is *unnamed* but is often called "Dives," which is a Latin translation for the word "rich." In a similar Jewish story, the rich man was a tax collector! The mention of "fine linen" is a reference to high-quality, Egyptian cotton underwear! Some have suggested that "every day" means he didn't keep the Sabbath; this may be over-analysis!

be a pointed reference to the robes of senior priests,¹⁰ and even if it's not, the mere mention of the color "purple" signifies he was very wealthy.¹¹ This nameless, high-ranking man, then, wore designer clothes and lived luxuriously and for his daily pleasure. Now it is worth saying that nothing in the story indicates he got his wealth by dubious means, [unlike the shrewd manager]. Moreover, we also need to remember that wealth in those days was widely considered as a sign of God's blessing and favour.¹² So we shouldn't view the man as a godless materialist! There is nothing inherently wrong in being rich,¹³ but we *are* accountable to God for our how we use our wealth and resources - and the rich man knew that. The Law of Moses provides crucial context here; listen again to our Old Testament reading: "If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Give generously and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake."¹⁴ The important basis for this instruction was because Jews believed *everything* belonged to God and they were simply stewards of God's provision.¹⁵ The traditional Jewish concept of ownership was therefore qualified, in that it was "in trust" and they were ultimately accountable to the creator God for their actions - in-keeping with his instructions. That is a sober message for us all today in the way we care for the environment and how we use and distribute *our* wealth and resources.

The story then moves on to Lazarus,¹⁶ whose name means "God helps" – the irony being the rich man *didn't* help when he knew that God's blessing of him was so he could be generous to others. Lazarus' plight is graphically dire: probably crippled and begging, he was covered with sores; he was hungry and longed to eat what fell from the rich man's table¹⁷; we are told even the semi-wild dogs¹⁸ would come and lick his sores. Lazarus died of starvation and disease at the rich man's gate. He then goes to the side of Abraham, implying he is now an honored guest at a great banquet.¹⁹ This would be shocking to the pharisees who would have seen Lazarus' demise as a judgment from God, whereas being at Abraham's

¹⁰ See Exod 28. Such robes were hugely expensive, costing many times the value of a working man's daily wage.

¹¹ Purple dyes were imported and regulated by Roman law. (The mention of "gates" also indicates his wealthy status.)

¹² See Deut 28:1-14. Indeed, this thinking is the basis for the so-called "prosperity gospel."

¹³ Luke's theology does heavily criticise the rich and reveals his (and God's) bias to the poor; see, for example: Luke 7:40-43; 11:39-41; 12:13-21, 32-34, 42-48; 14:21; 18:25.

¹⁴ Deut 15:7,10. See also Lev 19:9-10; Isa 58:6-7 and Luke 16:16-17. Luke often stresses that Jesus has come to fulfil the law and the prophets: See Luke 4:16-21; 24:25-27,44-47, Acts 2:16-6.

¹⁵ See, for example: Deut 10:14; Exod 9:29; 19:5; Lev 25:23; Ps 24:1; 89:11; 104:24; (Heb 2:10a).

¹⁶ This is the only person named in the parables of Jesus.

¹⁷ See also Luke 6:21; 9:17; 15:16. The last reference to the prodigal son is important in connecting the two parables.

¹⁸ These dogs were not pets but scavengers on the town's garbage heap; they were considered *unclean* animals.

¹⁹ Note, this story is *not* a theodicy, a justification of God in light of the existence of suffering. It does *not* mean personal suffering is a consequence of sin. And it would be a travesty to cynically conclude that it might be better if the poor stayed poor so they can have a good time in the afterlife. Yet the story does talk about God's mercy on those whose life circumstances results in them having no obvious way to enter the great feast.

side signifies he was considered righteous.²⁰ In contrast, the unrighteous rich man dies and is now in torment in Sheol, the Jewish place of the dead.²¹

Before moving on, let me make a few short observations from Luke's gospel itself because various threads are coming together in this story. First, in Mary's song - the Magnificat - she sang "He [God] has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty."²² Second, Luke reports John the Baptist as proclaiming, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'"²³ As we will hear in a moment, the rich man does appeal to "Father Abraham." But as will become shockingly clear, claiming Jewish nationality is not an automatic pass into paradise.²⁴ Third, in Jesus' so-called "Sermon on the Plain," he says "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. . . "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you will go hungry."²⁵ The point being that the radical reversal²⁶ we see in this parable is completely consistent with Christ's overall teaching. Moreover, remember the dinner conversation Jesus had earlier at the Pharisee's house, where he said, "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."²⁷ In the overall context of Luke's gospel, then, this strange story is *not* out of place.

What happens next? The rich man looks up from his place of torment and sees Father Abraham,²⁸ with Lazarus by his side. He calls for mercy, "Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames."²⁹ The rich man was clearly not ignorant of Lazarus as he recognizes him and knows his name, and he *still* treats him as someone inferior who he can order around. In fact, there is no direct communication between Lazarus and the rich man in the story, yet their separate lives *are* intertwined. Abraham responds by calling the rich man, "Son," so acknowledging his Jewish kinship, but then goes on to explain there is a great chasm between him and

²⁰ For example, in Ps 1:3 it says "the wicked do not prosper." Contrast this with Luke 6:20-16.

²¹ "Hades" is the old Testament "Sheol." This was multi-layered and well-developed in late 2nd Temple literature; e.g., 2 Esdras 7:36; 2 Baruch 51:5-6; 2 Macc 7:9,14,23; 1 Enoch 22. See also Luke 13:28-9. This (disturbing) parable gives no explicit explanation for the fates after death of the two main characters. Lazarus is not described as particularly virtuous and there is no indication that the rich man's wealth was ill-gotten. Nevertheless, Lazarus is now in a place of honour.

²² Luke 1:52-53. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Do-We-Want-A-Saviour.pdf>

²³ Luke 3:7-9,17. John's words of judgement were to Jews who thought they were automatically righteous in God's eyes.

²⁴ See Luke 23:43. This again shows the Jewish place of the dead (Sheol?) as being differentiated according to righteousness.

²⁵ Luke 6:20-21,24-25a.

²⁶ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Upside-Down-Kingdom-of-God.pdf>.

²⁷ Luke 14:13-14.; see also [25].

²⁸ Abraham is the "father of the nation" and, in a sense, represents God. This illustrates the Jewishness of the story. (See also Luke 13:16 and 19:9 for other examples of his usage of "Abraham.")

²⁹ Luke 16:24. This irony in that the rich man pleads for a little kindness from Lazarus when he has not shown any to Lazarus when he was in his distress.

them that no one can cross.³⁰ The existence of such a chasm would *not* shock or alarm Christ's audience; all Jews understood there would be a time of reckoning after death. As I said earlier, what was shocking was that the rich man was *not* the one by Abraham's side, rather it was Lazarus.³¹ Moreover, this should *not* be seen as a literal, detailed picture of the afterlife, rather the story makes some very clear points about *access to the coming feast*, when the kingdom of God comes in all its fulness, and linking that to our present behavior. Jesus is therefore echoing John the Baptist,³² in saying *not* all sons of Abraham will have a blessed life to in the age to come; [for some, there will be no Sabbath rest, but restlessness.]

The rich man accepts what Abraham has to say to him and then begs Father Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers.³³ Lazarus may not be able to cross the chasm to him, but perhaps he can somehow warn those still living. Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."³⁴ As we have already seen, the Mosaic Law was full of instruction about caring for the poor – and the Jewish religious leaders knew that full well. The rich man is not happy, "'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'"³⁵ This is the first time the element of repentance has been mentioned in this chapter on money and the love of it. Abraham ends the story saying, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."³⁶ This powerful punchline appears to have a double meaning in Luke's skillful telling. The first one is simply in-keeping with the parable and Christ's listening *audience*, namely: even if *Lazarus* came back from the dead and warned the rich man's brothers, they still would *not* believe.³⁷ The second way is one that *we* can appreciate, just like Luke's original *readers* who knew the full story,³⁸ that even the later resurrection of Jesus will *not* necessarily be convincing – even to *religious* (Jewish) people.³⁹ However we read the conclusion, Abraham rejects the rich man's logic. Like the rich man, the problem of the five brothers was *not a lack of evidence*; their problem was an unwillingness to hear the word of God.⁴⁰ Abraham's point was those who live in open and blatant defiance of the law of God are not going to change their ways, even if they're given some extra-special, miraculous revelation!⁴¹

³⁰ Luke 16:25-26. It appears Abraham takes no delight in explaining the facts of the matter to rich man. He has compassion.

³¹ The reason the rich man is where he now is because "actions have consequences" – as do *inactions*.

³² Luke 3:7-9. The rich man has failed to live up to his "sonship;" he hasn't been a wise steward of his wealth – Luke 16:1-9. See also [6].

³³ Luke 16:27-28. The rich man still assumes a Lazarus can be his errand boy!

³⁴ Luke 16:29.

³⁵ Luke 16:30.

³⁶ Luke 16:31. The clever use of the "resurrection" here does *not* necessarily mean Jesus is predicting the future.

³⁷ We can wonder if there are any links with John's (later) account of the raising of Lazarus; see John 11:1-44.

³⁸ Neither can we overlook the echo of the conclusion of the parable of the prodigal son, where the older brother (representing the Jewish religious leaders) is told "this brother of yours *was dead and is alive again*" (Luke 15:32). See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Parable-of-the-Man-with-Two-Sons.pdf> .

³⁹ The (post-resurrection) unbelief of many Jews in Jesus as the Messiah is a recurrent Lukan (and New Testament) theme.

⁴⁰ One minor aspect of the story us as a warning against those who are seeking signs/miracles as an excuse for disobedience.

⁴¹ See also Acts 1:3 – yet many Jews did not believe; see [39]. See also Luke 24:25–27.

What must we must take away from this uncompromising parable? Yes, there is a growing chasm between the rich and poor today, and we *must not* turn our backs on the poor – not least because we maintain our wealth in the West within a global economic system that is stacked against poorer countries. This is true *within* countries too; for example, the gap between rich and poor in the US has never been greater. Yet the story is *not* about riches and poverty, as such, but about the *attitude* of the rich man. He did *not* love God or his neighbor, Lazarus, just himself and his money. He *knew* better but didn't care. I think this is one of the key points of this story, both then and now. The rich man didn't place his trust or security in God, but in his money and it became an idol. Instead of his wealth being a blessing, it became a curse. The rich man had forgotten his basic task as *steward* of *God's* provision - and to be generous with it. The parable is therefore a *warning to change our ways*.

Second, the Pharisees, themselves lovers of money, were behaving toward people that Jesus was welcoming in exactly the same way as the rich man was behaving toward Lazarus. Jesus hung out with society's rejects – as did Jean Vanier – affirming “the innate dignity of every person - independent of their social, financial, cultural, or religious position.”⁴² The religious leaders knew their Scriptures and its ethical demands⁴³ and should have known better. A secular society today might articulate such things in terms of “human rights,” their origin – from a Christian perspective – is because we are *all* made in “the image of God.” Let us all, therefore, treat *everyone* with dignity and love others as we love ourselves.⁴⁴ But more than that, the Pharisees should have recognized that Jesus *was fulfilling* the Law and the prophets in all he was saying and doing. The person of Christ and his mission was - and is - the fulfilment or completion of the whole story of Israel and its renewal. That point is stressed in various places in Luke; hear again what the risen Jesus said to the two men he met on the road to Emmaus: “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.⁴⁵ Do we recognize who Jesus really is?

So, in the parable there is a *warning* to every one of us to open our eyes and to recognize that in Jesus and his ministry the kingdom of God is at hand, and therefore a *plea* for all of us to change our ways while there is still time.⁴⁶ We may think that the parable is addressed to lovers of money and we are therefore meant to identify ourselves with the rich man. Some of us might feel we're *not* rich and therefore that gives us an excuse to ignore this story. But I suggest we are to identify ourselves with the five brothers and the question is, “Will we hear Scriptures and respond appropriately?” Amen. Let us pray.

⁴² A quote from a Vatican II document.

⁴³ Especially to their fellow Jews.

⁴⁴ See also Mark 12:28-34 for Jesus' summary of the Law.

⁴⁵ Luke 24:25,27; see also 44. This also involved a transformation in their understanding of Messiah to a *suffering* Messiah.

⁴⁶ This, then, re-emphasizes the previous parable of the shrewd manager; see [6].