

Year C Proper 26 220925

Amos 6: 1 & 4-7

1 Timothy 6: 6-19

Luke 16: 19-31

‘My God Helps’

Our gospel reading is one that is helpful and timely, both in respects of the season of creation – we are in week four of five – and also at a time when many people are facing an uncertain and worrying winter with utility bills skyrocketing and inflation increasing.

The gospel reading is a parable told by Jesus. As in many parabolic stories that Jesus told, he applies a healthy dose of hyperbole to get his message across.

The rich man he talks about is not given a name, but we know he must be very rich because he dresses in the most expensive of garments, dyed purple and made of fine linen. These are the clothes of the royal and wealthy elite. Interestingly, our readings from the wonderful Book of Esther in Morning Prayer this last week describe just such wealth (cf Esther 1:6 & 8:15). The rich man feasts extravagantly, not just on special occasions, but every day.

In contrast, the poor man at his gate has a name, Lazarus. This is the Greek form of the Hebrew name ‘Elizier’, which means ‘My God helps’.

In admirably few words, Luke provides a vivid picture of the poor man’s condition. Lazarus was probably a cripple, so an outcast, which is further emphasised by being licked by dogs – dogs were ‘unclean’ in that society.

Lazarus dies and is carried away by angels to Abraham. Some translations say he was carried away to Abraham’s bosom, or lap. Such an intimate picture and one that shows favour, by one of the father’s of the Hebrew faith.

The rich man dies, and in Hades, he is tormented. So, we have a rapid reversal of the 'states' of these two characters.

The rich man has a dialogue with Abraham. Abraham calls the rich man 'child', a term of love and fatherly affection, but in response to the rich man's entreaties that Lazarus act as a messenger to warn his family, Abraham points out that the Scriptures (Moses and all the prophets) contain all the necessary information and guidance about how to live a just and equitable life.

The rich man's argument that Lazarus, as a messenger risen from the dead, would convince others to repent, is dismissed by Abraham. This final part of the parable may well point beyond this parable to Jesus as prophet whom God raised up from the dead at the resurrection, and how deaf and blind the people were to our risen Lord's message.

Luke's telling of this parable – it doesn't appear in the other gospels – is not at all sympathetic to the rich man. But is this a parable about the love of money and wealth and the comfortable life that sufficient money can buy?

Could this parable be as much about what we actually see and how we react to what we see, as it is about wealth?

We don't have a detailed description in the parable of the relationship between the rich man and Lazarus whilst they were alive. Did the rich man acknowledge the poor crippled beggar at his gate, I wonder? Did the rich man agonise over whether to give the poor man some coins when he walked by. Did he wonder whether it was sensible to give money to beggars?

Maybe the rich man wondered if Lazarus should be categorised as one of the 'deserving poor' or one of the 'lazy good-for-nothing poor'? He may have been concerned whether Lazarus would use any

money tossed to him wisely or not? I know these are some of the thoughts that go through my mind when on the streets of Edinburgh. To my shame, I can avert my gaze, and walk on by. It is to my shame because I know that isn't what Jesus would do.

But here's the thing. The sort of 'seeing' Lazarus that the rich man probably did, isn't really the sort of 'seeing' Jesus challenges us to have. Jesus doesn't want us to evaluate and judge, to question whether Lazarus 'deserves' help and is worthy of our support. Jesus wants us to see as Jesus sees.

Jesus knows that looking the other person in their eyes risks recognising their humanity, and the hurt, injury and pain they are holding.

To see as Jesus sees, we may see our own wounded self in the poor man. We may well see and have to confront all sorts of uncomfortable truths. Truths about the poor man's hunger, his illness, his poverty. Truths about the systems and processes which led to the poor man being there in the first place.

To see as Jesus sees, to look into the eyes of the other with compassion and love, means we are already building a relationship, we may find we have far more in common with the poor man than we thought, finding kinship where we expected none.

In the gospel reading the rich man comes to some sort of realisation that the chasm between himself and the archetype of the poor and poverty-stricken, Lazarus, has led him to the place he now finds himself in. It is too late for him, and Abraham suggests it is also too late for the rich man's brothers.

This parable is one that confronts us with a very uncomfortable lesson and a challenging call for living a life of radical love, following Christ's example. We are challenged to see the world through Jesus'

eyes. It is scary and uncomfortable. It asks a lot of us. It asks us searching questions about how we live our lives and how we use the earth's resources:

- ✝ Do I have enough?
- ✝ Do I have more than enough, which means others do not have enough?
- ✝ Do I live a resource-rich, carbon-intensive life, meaning so much of God's creation is suffering from climate change?
- ✝ Do I begrudge paying taxes and am glad when the income tax rates are lowered, or do I see paying sufficient income taxes that help alleviate the poor as part of a Christian response to support those in need?
- ✝ Am I moved to share what I have, redistributing resources or reducing my demand for resources?
- ✝ Does the suffering and impoverishment of another person move me to ask myself searching questions, and repent?

When praying and meditating on this parable, I really did not want to identify with the rich man with no name, but I could not kid myself. I cannot point away from myself without condemning my own lifestyle, some of it based on living in this society at this time, some of it based on my own personal choices.

When I looked at news reports about the hundreds of thousands displaced by floods in Pakistan, or news reports of famine in the horn of Africa, they are Lazarus and all of us in the carbon-intensive developed world is the rich man. I am sure in a moment of reflection which I invite you to now hold, you can find other examples of Lazarus in the world, where we are, like it or not, the rich man...

Is the great chasm between the rich man in Hades, and Lazarus in the embrace of Abraham, similar to the chasm between my life experiences and those in Pakistan and in the horn of Africa, between my life and those who are poverty-stricken in our own land, and all the other places we have identified? It feels it, and I feel convicted.

It is only Jesus who reaches across such a great chasm, not just for me, but for all, to show us the way forward in our lives. His example of selflessness, of sacrifice, of healing and of love, provide a bridge for us all. In the example of His life, death and resurrection, we have all we need to help us close that chasm, that yawning difference between the lives of the impoverished and suffering of the world, and our lives.

The choices we make, matter. Do we choose to look away or look into the eyes of each other with love? When we choose to look through the eyes of our risen Lord, what will we see? And how will it change us?

Lazarus means 'my God helps'. How may we pray for God's guidance to help us today?