

Dear friends,

Today we read of Jesus telling a parable about an unnamed rich man and a poor man called Lazarus. In this life, one of these has all the comforts while the other has nothing; but in the afterlife their fates are reversed. Jesus challenges his audience not to neglect the demands of justice in this life. This reading asks us to consider whether we walk the walk or just talk the talk. Can we begin to build the kingdom of God here and now? As the early Church grew in numbers and included the 'urban middle class', the question arose about the appropriate use of wealth – it seems from this passage that money is OK as long as it is used responsibly. Other lectionary readings for today include Amos 6: 1a, 4-7 and 1 Timothy 6: 6-19. As always, I wish you every blessing – Margaret.

Call to worship:

Happy are those whose hope is in the Lord their God. Praise the Lord, O my soul!

Our God is generous and just and lifts up the lowly. Praise the Lord, O my soul!

Our God will reign for ever. Praise the Lord, O my soul! Amen.

We, your people, Lord, come before you –

in penitence, as we remember those we have left at the gates of our lives and neglected;

in joy, as we celebrate your love that draws us into your kingdom;

in thanksgiving, as we name in our hearts those who first brought us to faith;

and in humility, as we acknowledge Jesus our Lord, who bridged the gap between heaven and earth.

As your people, Lord, we come before you and praise your holy name. Amen.

Reflect now on the gap between what you want to do and what you actually do; between who you want to be and who you are – bring both to Christ.

Mind the gap between your words and your deeds; between your own and others' needs;

between your actions and your prayers; between your own and others' cares.

Mind the gap – and should you fall, Christ will hear your urgent call.

He knows your worst, he knows your best – he fills the gap and calls you blessed. Amen.

The words to 'Be still and know that I am God'. Anonymous. Based on Psalm 46: 10-11 StF 18

1 Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am God.

2 I am the Lord who saves and heals.

I am the Lord who saves and heals.

I am the Lord who saves and heals.

3 In you, O Lord, I put my trust.

In you, O Lord, I put my trust.

In you, O Lord, I put my trust.

Prayer:

We praise you, living God, that we can bring ourselves and others to the gates of your love – with our fears, our concerns, our joys, our thanks – and know that the gates will never be closed.

Bless now those we carry in our hearts and those who have no-one to name them in prayer.

God of all the world, of rich and poor, we celebrate your presence in our lives. Amen.

O Lord Jesus Christ, forgive us for the many occasions when we resist your call to follow you in making the poor our priority.

Forgive us when we are afraid to spend our money and time on their needs.

Forgive us when we feel superior to them and for any part we might play in their exploitation – and if ever we have found ourselves unwilling to bring them relief.

Lord, forgive us and help us. Amen.

Loving God, we thank you that it is not too late for every day is a new chance to serve you, to love others and to be the people you made us to be.

Thank you for forgiving us when we get it wrong – and for being ever willing to begin again.

May we dispense kind words and generous actions – and may we be known for an attitude of love which honours you and all that you have made. Amen.

Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come and thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Luke 16: 19-31. New Living Translation. [*Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, Wheaton, Illinois 60189 USA*]

Jesus said: ‘There was a certain rich man who was splendidly clothed and who lived each day in luxury. At his door lay a diseased beggar named Lazarus. As Lazarus lay there longing for scraps from the rich man’s table, the dogs would come and lick his open sores. Finally, the beggar died and was carried by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, and his soul went to the place of the dead [Hades]. There, in torment, he saw Lazarus in the far distance with Abraham. The rich man shouted: “father Abraham, have some pity! Send Lazarus here to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in anguish in these flames.”

But Abraham said to him: “ Son, remember that during your lifetime you had everything you wanted, and Lazarus had nothing. So he is here now being comforted and you are in anguish. And besides, there is a great chasm separating us. Anyone who wants to cross over to you from here is stopped at the edge, and no-one there can cross over to us.”

Then the rich man said: “Please, father Abraham, send him to my father’s home. For I have five brothers, and I want him to warn them about this place of torment so they won’t have to come here when they die.”

But Abraham said: “Moses and the prophets have warned them. Your brothers can read their writings any time they want to.”

The rich man replied: “No, Father Abraham,! But if someone is sent to them from the dead, then they will turn from their sins.”

But Abraham said: “If they won’t listen to Moses and the prophets, they won’t listen even if someone rises from the dead.””

Comment:

Here Jesus’ audience is probably the ‘avaricious Pharisees’ of 16:14 who were sneering at Jesus. Pharisees professed belief in a future life and judgement, so today’s narrative is suited to this context. This parable continues Jesus’ teaching on the responsible use of possessions.

Only the poor man is named – Lazarus means ‘God helps’. This is the only use of a personal name in a gospel parable and it is significant that Jesus gives it to a beggar.

Purple-dyed clothing was a feature of some upper classes in Palestine whose lifestyle was modelled upon the ostentatious Roman upper class. Lazarus, on the other hand, lives rough with a health problem that keeps him from employment. He would not be a leper, for then he could not beg in public. Are the licking dogs well-fed house pets or guard dogs which have dined on the leftover scraps? Note how Lazarus was ‘carried away by angels’ to Abraham’s side while the rich man is simply ‘buried’.

In the Greek Old testament, the gloomy abode of the dead, Sheol, was translated as Hades. Hades should be distinguished from Gehenna [hell], the final abode of the damned. Hades seems to be an intermediate abode of the dead awaiting final judgement. Condemnation to hell is not certain for this rich man – and his concern for those left behind may have helped him.

The rich man asks for Lazarus by name, so he might be sent to his five brothers as a warning. The use of the personal name means that, before his death, he had been quite aware of the beggar, despite lacking any concern for the man’s sorry state. Lazarus would also be recognisable to the rich man’s five brothers.

The punch-line is aimed at the rich Pharisees who have the Law and the prophets but who do not live in conformity with them. Not even someone coming from the realm of death will change those who shut their ears to God’s word in Moses and the Prophets. [The fact of Jesus’ resurrection will have the same result among many of the Pharisees]. Future judgement depends on responsible decisions and lifestyle here and now.

Meditation of a Pharisee. [A Most Amazing Man – year C – written by Nick Fawcett. Copyright 2009 Nick Fawcett].

He’s gone too far this time, he really has! That parable of his, the one about the rich man and Lazarus – you know who he was getting at, don’t you?

That’s right – *us*, as usual.

It was a familiar refrain, all that nonsense about refusing to listen to the Law and prophets – the message veiled but clear enough.

But then he threw a in a *new* accusation for good measure, one too ridiculous for words, suggesting that even if somebody were to rise from the dead, we wouldn’t listen to them, still wouldn’t believe their words.

Honestly, who does he take us for? *Sadducees*?

Of course we’d believe! Wouldn’t *you*? *Wouldn’t* anyone?

It would be obvious, wouldn’t it, that *God* was at work, for he alone can defeat the grave.

He thinks we’re so bigoted, does he, so set in our ways, that nothing will open our minds to his so-called truth?

Well, I tell you what, if Jesus is so certain about things, let’s help him die and see if he can rise again himself. That would settle things, wouldn’t it?

Show one way or another if he’s right or wrong.

For I tell you what, if he can do that – conquering death itself – only a fool would argue.

Prayer:

Forgive us, Lord, for we fail to hear your voice – and too often it’s not that we *don’t* but that we *won’t*, our minds closed to what challenges and disturbs.

Consciously or otherwise, we dig our heels in, resisting awkward questions, unwilling to contemplate anything that might call for change, whether in attitude, lifestyle or beliefs.

Open our hearts to the truth which alone can set us free, and give us courage to listen to what you would say, so that we may grow in faith and understanding, and live more faithfully for you. Amen.

Let us pray to God who loves the poor with an eternity of compassion – who has demonstrated that compassion in his Son, Jesus Christ, and who reaches out to the poor in the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us pray for the church here and worldwide, that she may be filled with the compassion of Christ, and may learn to live in right relationship with others who need, not only the gospel but the very necessities of food, water, shelter and health.

Let us pray for a world in which the many sit and suffer at the gate of the few, that justice may prevail – that compassion may rule – and that the wealth of the few may be used more effectively to alleviate the poverty of the many.

We pray for our local communities, and all who suffer unnoticed by the many. May God grant us eyes to see the needs of our neighbours, and hearts to reach out to them in the name of Christ.

We pray for the sick, the neglected, the abused, the destitute and the penniless – especially those known to us personally. May their needs be met, their suffering alleviated, and their place in the community established.

We give thanks for those who have died, for all that was good in their lives. As they now enjoy your nearer presence, comfort those who grieve their passing, and grant that through their sorrow, they may be encouraged to bring compassion to others.

God of infinite compassion, hear our prayer.

We make these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, our strong, compassionate Redeemer. Amen.

The words to ‘As the deer pants for the water’ written by Martin J. Nystrom [b.1956] StF 544

1 As the deer pants for the water, so my heart longs after you.

You alone are my heart’s desire and I long to worship you.

Refrain: You alone are my strength, my shield, to you alone may my spirit yield.

You alone are my heart’s desire and I long to worship you.

2 I want you more than gold or silver, only you can satisfy.

You alone are the real joy-giver and the apple of my eye. *Refrain.....*

3 You’re my friend and you are my brother, even though you are a king.

I love you more than any other, so much more than anything. *Refrain.....*

Close: Lord, help me not to mind the gap between me and those who have more than me – between my lifestyle and the lifestyle of others – between my achievements and the achievements of others. Rather, may I be blessed with the generosity to share, and the wisdom to be content – that trust, compassion and thankfulness may stay close to me. Amen.

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