

## Proper 21 Year C 2022 (RCL)

Jesus is talking to the Pharisees. He has told them 'You cannot serve God and money' and they scoff at him. Luke describes them as 'lovers of money' - so the parable of the nameless rich man and Lazarus is aimed directly at them - and at all who love money.

The rich man is portrayed as a figure who makes a vocation of self-indulgence. His outer garments are dyed purple, a very expensive dye and a colour implying imperial connections. Beneath he wears clothes made of fine linen - so, he is dressed in one of the most expensive outfits known in the ancient world. He dines sumptuously, not just on special occasions, but every day. He is probably a Sadducee, not only because the Sadducees were amongst the few people who could afford such a life style but because, as we shall see later, he makes no connection whilst alive between his life style and what will happen to him after he dies. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, but in the OT idea of Sheol, or Hades, a shadowy underworld where everyone, good or bad, went after death. It was a neutral place where there was no pain and no hope. As Hades was a place of no responsibility, the rich man believes his present life is the only

one and that he will not be held accountable for his actions when he dies. As we shall see, he was in for a surprise.

In contrast to the rich man who feasts in company every day, Lazarus lies alone at his gate, watching the guests going in and out. He is the only person named in any of Jesus' parables - his name is a corruption of the Hebrew Eleazar, which means 'God helps'. The name makes sad sense, as no one around him is going to offer help. Lazarus is covered with ulcers and he is so weak that he cannot ward off the scavenging dogs. He longs for the scraps from the rich man's table. Eating with their hands, the rich man's guests would be given bread to wipe their fingers, bread which was then thrown to the house dogs - remember the woman who told Jesus that 'even the dogs get the scraps which fall from the table'? - but Lazarus doesn't even get that much. And so, lonely, hungry and in pain, he dies. There is no mention of a funeral or a burial, even though the unburied dead were believed to bring a curse on the land - they would certainly be a cause of stench and disease. The nameless rich man also dies - he is buried, presumably at great expense.

In the next scene we are in the other world, and there has been a reversal of fortunes. Lazarus is a guest at the heavenly

banquet, seated in a place of honour, next to Father Abraham, no longer an outsider, someone forgotten, but cherished and happy. From far off in Hades, the rich man sees what is happening, but still ignores Lazarus - his words are addressed to Abraham. Lazarus was of no concern to him during his life, and now has only the function of serving him in his torment. He has discovered that Hades is not the neutral place he had thought it to be, but a place of fire. The flames around him represent the destruction of everything he values - even worshipped - his fine clothes - gone; his feasting - finished; his fate is fixed. But his total selfishness has also gone - he thinks of his brothers who share his belief in the nature of Hades. Having been refused the services of Lazarus for his own comfort, he tries to enlist him, again through Abraham, to serve his family. 'Send him to my father's house'. He implies that had he known he would have acted differently. 'I didn't know'; 'I hadn't realised'; 'There was nothing I could do'; 'it wasn't my responsibility'. All the excuses we use to evade doing what needs to be done, or to get out of taking our portion of the blame. While on earth, the rich man had accepted the poverty, the pain, the isolation of Lazarus as just part of the way things were, and he had done nothing to alleviate

those things; he simply accepted - and found acceptable - what was happening. He knows Lazarus by name - he didn't abuse him or assault him - he did nothing - and that was his crime - he did nothing. He acted as though Lazarus didn't exist, as if he were already dead; he forgot about him and Lazarus died of his forgetfulness.

So what of us who read this story? Like the brothers we have Moses and the prophets and we have someone who did rise from the dead. More than enough! We cannot say 'I didn't know'. There is nothing wrong with being rich of itself. Being rich wasn't what the rich man was being judged on. It was not his wealth which condemned him; it was his total disregard of the needs of others. Like the rich whom Amos rails against in Bethel - those who 'eat lambs from the flock . . . who drink wine from bowls . . . but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph'. This was during the time of the long and prosperous reign of Jeroboam II, a reign noted for its pervasive injustice that victimised the poor and was supported by empty worship, which had turned Bethel - a name which means 'God's house' - into 'the king's sanctuary' (Am 7.13). Abraham, in our parable, points out that the man's brothers had the prophets to teach them. These ancient Hebrew texts (circa

700BC) repeatedly declare that the use of religion is null and void unless people treat their fellow human beings with mercy and justice. It is not enough to drop a coin into a beggar's hand - you have to ask yourself 'how far am I responsible for his being a beggar?'

The marriage of the love of God and the love of mankind was the backbone of Christ's teaching, perhaps most vividly portrayed in the teachings in Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and goats. As the rich man discovered, he couldn't take his money with him to buy comfort in Hades - as Paul write to Timothy 'we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it' - 'for the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil', and the poor are the victims of this perverse worship. Paul invites us to 'pursue righteousness' - a righteousness which is separated by a great chasm from the conduct censured in the nameless, heartless, despairing rich man.