

26th Sunday Year C
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Luke 16:19-31

Of all the parables to reflect on, the story of the rich man and Lazarus is one of the most challenging.

Not only is it full of vivid biblical imagery which is at some remove from our collective imagination, the parable itself is difficult - even scandalous – to hear.

In Luke's narrative it is addressed to the Pharisees, who were lovers of money. The Pharisees sneer at Jesus' teachings on wealth and justice.

And the story itself is unique to Luke, who loves to give us hard sayings on the politics of the kingdom.

In this life, Lazarus is a member of the invisible poor – unknown, unnamed and unloved. Lazarus lives outside the gate of the rich man who lives a life of luxury and ease.

There is no sense that the rich man himself is particularly immoral. Like the Pharisees, the rich man might be perfectly just by worldly standards. His problem is that he lives a life of self-centred consumption.

The rich man enjoys for his exclusive use the goods that God has given for the benefit of all.

We can probably imagine the life of the rich man. Despite the distance between Jesus' culture and ours, he could easily be an archetype of comfortable modern existence.

For we too want what the rich man has: to be comfortable and to pursue the pleasures of life.

I am reminded of how anaesthetised my own senses are from the poverty and homelessness that surrounds me; or how difficult it seems for our society to accept refugees.

So the rich man goes on enjoying his lot, while all the time unimaginable pain waits just beyond his view.

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As in so many of Jesus' parables, the story of Lazarus brings good news of a great eschatological reversal, an upending of things in the last days.

In the kingdom of God, the world will be turned upside down: the alienated will be

reconciled while the insiders will find themselves lost. The last will be first.

In fact, this episode is a narrative depiction of Jesus' great "Sermon on the Plain" (Luke 6) "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."

The great failure of the rich man is not simply that he failed to give generously to charity. His pride prevented him from acknowledging that Lazarus' humanity was the same as his own.

Lazarus was invisible for him. The rich man couldn't admit that Lazarus had a claim on his goods, or a place at his table.

Yet God has done what human beings couldn't. St Augustine says, "the rich man's name was thrown around, but God

kept quiet about it. The other's name was lost in silence, and God spoke it." (Sermo 33).

And as if the parable couldn't hit any harder, there is more. For in this tale of the kingdom, the rich man cannot recognise the way God has embraced Lazarus.

Twice the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to relieve his suffering, once with water and another time to warn his brothers. He wants Lazarus to serve his needs! His ego knows no bounds, even when he is confronted with the full consequences of his actions.

The absurdity of it all is that – as Abraham says – even if someone rises from the dead, the rich will still refuse to believe. Likewise, Luke tells us, the

Pharisees will refuse to repent even when Jesus rises to new life.

The rich man simply doesn't get it. If he were to be admitted to the kingdom with Lazarus he would have to surrender his pride and be merciful.

He would have to discover that his life had blinded him to the love he owed, both to his Creator and to the man who was his brother.

The rich man would have to listen to Lazarus' story and realise that God had named him and loved him.

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So the chasm fixed between Lazarus and the rich man is opened not by God – as if this were primarily about the relationship

between 'heaven and hell'. No, rather human sin opens the abyss.

For it is human beings who subject God's creation to the futility of poverty. So often we refuse to relieve the suffering of others.

Much about our own society is designed to shelter us from the reality of suffering. Death and pain are often hidden.

Into this reality, the parable speaks of the revelation of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ. It doesn't invite speculation about the nature of life after death, but rather calls for our repentance.

It invites us to go out from this place and to live in a new way, seeking to be bearers of God's mercy; to turn away from our hardness of heart and seek hearts full of compassion.

In particular, the corporal and spiritual works of mercy are the classic expressions of Christian compassion for those outside the gate.

Works of mercy are an antidote to the pride that surrounds itself with a wall of convenient luxuries. They are also a means of blessing and hope to the world.

Committing ourselves to feeding the hungry and consoling the afflicted is central, then, to the Christian life.

But how is such mercy possible?

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The rich man feasted sumptuously, for his own pleasure. But here in this Mass we have a different kind of feast: a feast of

mercy for the poor, an anticipation of the great banquet to come.

On Tuesday, the church remembers the French priest St Vincent de Paul, who found himself ministering to the galley-slaves of Marseille.

When Vincent saw the great suffering of God's people he turned away from his educated church career and devoted his life to works of mercy.

The Vincentian tradition rightly insists that the Eucharist is the source of all work for the excluded and condemned.

Christians throughout the ages have discovered that when they adore the hidden Lord in his sacrament, their eyes are opened anew to the suffering of others.

When we are united in the Mass to Jesus' suffering and victory - to his death and resurrection for the poor - we are called to work in solidarity wherever there is pain.

The rich man's table was laid out for the love of self, but this table exists for the love of God and neighbour, and everyone has a place here.

The grace that makes this possible is the discovery that we with Lazarus, by God's mercy, are to be named, welcomed and loved in the kingdom of God; to whom be all honour and glory, now and in the ages to come. Amen.