

Pentecost 16
29/9/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15

Psalm 91

1 Timothy 6:16-19

Luke 16:19-31

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not. Amen.

“For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins —
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate.

Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate ...” (Amos 5.12, 15a)

These prophetic words from the book of Amos ring out in response to today’s Gospel reading. Lazarus has been laid down outside the gate of the rich man.

Lazarus *has been laid down*. Perhaps he has been laying there for a long time. Long enough, at least, for the rich man to learn his name, as we see later in the reading. Or perhaps we are to understand that Lazarus was himself unable to choose where he lay, someone else lay him outside the gate. Lazarus has been pushed aside.

Whatever the case Lazarus *has been laid down*, he is there, covered in sores, hungry, longing. Outside the gate. He receives no justice in the gate.

“For I know how many are your transgressions,
and how great are your sins —” (Amos 5.12a)

Before this parable about the rich man and Lazarus Jesus told the story of a dishonest manager. A manager who squandered the wealth of his master, another rich man. When the manager’s transgressions became known the rich man asked for an account of his management. Sensing his imminent firing the manager used the last moments of his employment to forgive some of the debts owed to his master. We are not told if, in the end, the dishonest manager was in fact fired. We are told only that his master, the rich man, commended his dishonesty as shrewdness.

This is a confusing story — which is probably why a lot of sermons last focused on the lectionary reading from 1 Timothy. But this story is important background for today’s Gospel reading, because it sets up the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. It is within this confrontational context that Jesus tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

The Pharisees found the first story as confusing as we do, it seems. In response they ridiculed Jesus, not knowing how to make sense of his teaching — as we often don’t. And

so Jesus makes cryptic statements about the law and the prophets: they were in effect until John the Baptist came, since then the Kingdom of God is proclaimed. And many try to enter the Kingdom of God by force.

This is not to suggest that the law and the prophets are to be done away with. For Jesus says that it would be easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one letter of the law to be dropped.

We are supposed to understand the story of the rich man and Lazarus as some sort of explanation and rebuke to the Pharisees. And, perhaps — I might add — an explanation and rebuke to us.

“you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,
and push aside the needy in the gate.” (Amos 5.12b)

The Pharisees, we are told, were lovers of money. And so Jesus tells a story of a rich man. Not merely rich, but richer than rich.

Not dressed in the white that showed he did not need to work in the field, and could afford staff to do his laundry. But a rich man dressed in purple, which showed he could send away to foreign lands for dyes or exotic fabrics with which to dress.

Not a rich man who put on a grand and special banquet. But a rich man whose banquets had become mundane, so often were they held — daily. Mimicking the lavish style of Kings and Emperors.

If the Pharisees love money, then let them hear the story of this rich man.

And, given their affinity for the law, let them hear of a poor and unclean man. Covered in sores, and laid outside the gate. Even dogs would come and lick his sores.

And this man’s name was Lazarus, or in Hebrew ‘Eleizer,’ meaning — in a feat of irony — “God has helped.” The point, of course, is that no one helps, and Lazarus dies.

This rich man also dies.

The story seems to be about the eternal fate of these two people: the rich man and Lazarus.

The rich man, who the Pharisees are wont to praise, is of course the villain. Uncharitable, lacking in generosity and hospitality. He dies and goes to the bad place, tormented by fire.

The poor man, Lazarus, is of course the one to whom we should attend. He dies and goes to the good place, to be with Abraham — the great father of Israel.

In their eternal resting places their fates are reversed. The rich man is punished for his failure to live out the virtues taught by the law and the prophets. While God, through Abraham, vindicates the poor man Lazarus, and makes everything okay. At last “God has helped.”

And when the rich man seeks in this afterlife the mercy he himself failed to show on earth, he is told: “no.” His fate has been set and sealed. His choice made. The gate that kept Lazarus outside of the rich man’s property, and away from any experience of mercy, has become a great chasm in the place of the dead, and so makes it impossible for the rich man to receive mercy. Perhaps this is the final justice of God.

“Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate ...” (Amos 5.15a)

We might be able to see in this story a simple moral lesson, and a warning. Echoing the prophetic cry of Amos: take care of those in need, do good. Do not be like the rich man. Because the judgement of God is coming, and in the afterlife all will be set and sealed: justice will be done inside the gate of God’s Kingdom in heaven. No one can enter by force, or by petition, but only by living now the virtues taught by the law and the prophets.

Go then, and do likewise.

I want to suggest, however, that the way Luke recollects this story points us beyond simple moral lessons.

The story of the rich man and Lazarus in the hands of Luke’s masterful retelling does not give us a simple moral lesson, but proclaims who we are as God’s people, as the body of Christ.

Lazarus is the only character named in any of parables told by Jesus. His name means, ironically, “God has helped.” But his name has another heritage: Lazarus, or Eleizer was the name of the heir of Abraham, before the birth of Isaac.

Lazarus recalls not simply a poor man outside a gate, but those who seemed to be left outside of God’s promises through Abraham for the whole world. Lazarus is a sign for all of us that God’s redemptive plan for the world have not forgotten anyone. God’s redemptive plan for the world includes those who seemed to be left outside of God’s saving work through Abraham and ancient Israel. Not because the promise to Abraham has been replaced, but because this new Kingdom of God, here and now, brings to a crescendo the teachings of the law and the prophets.

Before telling the story of the rich man and Lazarus Jesus says it would be easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one letter of the law to be dropped.

The story ends with the statement: “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

With this Jesus is making clear that his resurrection is not a passing away of the world, and is not a passing away of the law, but is a fulfilment of the law, and brings the reign of God once and for all into this world.

As readers we already understand that this story is recollected by communities founded on the assumption that someone *has* risen from the dead: Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified Messiah. And in this rising from the dead God *has* displayed the salvific plan for the whole world. Establishing the Kingdom of God.

This is the point of the ironic twist at the end of the story. Even if someone rises from the dead they will not believe. We read this and proclaim that someone has risen from the dead and so the Kingdom of God has not been established in an afterlife, in a looming resurrection, but has taken root in the very midst of creation.

Hear then these words from the Apostle Paul:

‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?” (That is, to bring Christ down.)

Or, “Who will descend into the abyss?” (That is, to bring Christ up from the dead.)

“The word is near you,
on your lips and in your heart.” (Rom. 10.6-8)

This is the proclamation that the story of the rich man and Lazarus points to. The reversal of who is rich and who is poor, who is inside of the gate experiencing justice and who is left outside, has been completed in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

Before we learn the moral lesson to help those in need, we must first recognise that we ourselves have been brought into a new relationship with God and the world. We must first see that we do not enter the Kingdom of God by force, but are freely and graciously welcomed in.

We are Lazarus. The ones who seemed to be left outside of the promise of Abraham.

We are Lazarus. The ones left outside the gate, victims of injustice.

We are Lazarus. Longing to be fed like the prodigal who seeks to return to the loving Father, and a banquet of welcome.

We are Lazarus. The ones who cannot enter the Kingdom of God by force, but are welcomed in by the freely given, overwhelming love and grace of God.

Before we declare what we must do, we proclaim who we are in light of the risen Christ. We are Lazarus: those who “God has helped.”

For all the unloving words that have been spoken to us, we proclaim that God is love and loves us.

For all the wounds that do not heal because they continue to be reopened, we proclaim that the crucified Messiah transfigured a scarred body into glory.

For all the exclusion, we proclaim that we rest in the welcome embrace of the Spirit.

And we are called to *be* this reality, in this community, here and now: a witness to the expanding reach of God’s love, glory, and welcome home. We are the body of the one who has risen from the dead.

From this proclamation. This foundation of hope. Not what we do, but what God has done in Christ.

From here we overcome the chasm that stops mercy flowing out and redeeming those who have lost their way.

From here, we find rest in the overwhelming love and grace of God. That does not guilt us into goodness, but loves us into new life.

From here we begin to open the gate and welcome others in: to make sure justice is done. Because true justice is found on the cross of the risen crucified one.

“We shall be judged, but with Christ. And there lies our salvation.” — Karl Barth

Amen.
