

Pentecost 17
2/10/2022

Mark the Evangelist

1 Timothy 6:6-10
Psalm 91
Luke 16:19-31

Looking in the right place

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16: 31)

All texts are tricky, even those that appear to be quite straightforward. Why do I say that? Because what they are about is always a solution to a problem that is inevitably concealed from us. By contrast, those who first received these texts, whether gospel or letter, were invariably aware of the issues at stake. Two thousand years later, we are not. We are hamstrung. We need to find out - what is the problem for which this text is a solution? What is the question which this text is wanting to answer? Biblical scholars for the last couple of hundred years have been able to identify these questions, which, if we let them in, should make any reading of the Bible much more interesting for everyone. It is an increasing frustration that those who put themselves outside the Church as well as many inside, are, for a variety of reasons, completely unaware of how much we now know about how these ancient texts must be heard. Otherwise, it is all too easy to quote texts out of context. Today is a case in point.

To illustrate the significance of these background matters, let me try to paint a few broad brushstrokes to help us with this text. With regard to the four gospels, Mark and John act as chronological bookends, by date Mark first, and John last. In different ways, their endeavour may be understood as being an explanation of why and how Jesus is different from John the Baptist. Then enclosed within these two bookends we have the gospels of Matthew and Luke, each writing for one of the two sorts of people who became the first Christians. These two were either Jews or Greeks. Matthew is writing for Jews who had become Christian, helping them to understand the difference between their former and now new faith. This is why for Matthew the genealogy of Jesus has to start with Abraham. Luke, on the other hand, is writing a universal history for enculturated Greeks who had become Christian, which is why he has to begin his genealogy with Adam, only to underscore in the text today why Moses is crucial. The fact is that what was mother's milk for Jews, their Jewish scriptures, was a complete mystery to the Greeks. So, Luke has to get them first to understand, and then to take seriously what for them was an alien culture.

Which brings us finally to our text today. Luke writes to Gentiles, those who were not Jews:

“If you (Greeks) do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will you be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”

The Greeks knew all about dying and rising gods, ignorant though they were of Moses and the prophets. What's more, the Greeks were pre-occupied with how they were to get across the river Styx. That is to say, for them, earthly life is simply a prelude to what lay beyond death. Hence, the fact that, in our text, the rich man is “buried” is noteworthy. He had come to a radical end, but was about to start a new adventure. Jews on the other hand were not so interested. For them, death is a fact of life, “going” or “being gathered

to one's fathers" and "being with Abraham" is enough. So, then, we are told that Lazarus does not need a burial, simply that "he died".

We have to be careful not to read prejudicial assumptions into this parable. The truth is that the rich man is no blatant scoundrel. He just lives according to the then contemporary conviction – even some modern ones – considering wealth and poverty to be the gift of God. And Lazarus – nothing is said about his goodness. Indeed, if the seven deadly sins are any yard-stick, he is no saint, since the text tells us of his envy of the rich man. And for goodness sake, why not? He wants only to gather the crumbs that fell from the groaning table. Lazarus is simply one who has no human help. Certainly, he appears to be an immobile cripple – the text tells us that someone "laid" him on the road. Then we learn of the presence of dogs. Generally speaking, we like dogs, but at the time of our text they were considered unclean. So, the dogs licking Lazarus sores was no act of compassion, but simply emphasises to the first hearers how wretched is his condition. Yet, despite all this, he is given a name. He is Lazarus. He is not just any anonymous "man" like the one falling among thieves also lying on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, seen, but avoided, by the priest and Levite.

What then is the point of it all? It is this. The terrible thing is not the wealth of the rich man, but the innocence, indeed stupidity, with which he lives his life of ease, avoiding contact with what is right before his eyes – unlike the priest and Levite in the earlier parable, he does not even *look* at Lazarus. We feel this callous indifference. Dives will not be the first, and certainly not the last, to turn away from presenting misery. Which gives us warrant to encounter Lazarus not merely as a solitary individual, but increasingly as a political victim of communal national and international inequality.

Two things are crucial in understanding our reading. First, the description of Lazarus' good fortune is not to be heard as some sort of morality tale about the reversal of fortune after death. Rather, the point of the parable is to condemn the wrong done to all called Lazarus on the earth. To this end, second, the conversation between Dives, the rich man, and Abraham is the central concern. Dives asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his still-living, presumably equally wealthy five brothers, of their dire condition. The first hearers - the Greeks for whom Luke writes his text - would readily have seen themselves in the figure of the five brothers. And are we not also such Greeks? In which case, all of us are being told: you don't need any warning. You already have it:

"If you do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will you be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."

With these five brothers, we have that same word of scripture – and that is sufficient. We all have Moses and the prophets. Those who are unmoved by that message will not, we are told, be convinced by a miracle, even by something like a resurrection.

But then imagine this - what if our text is offering us something quite new, so breaching that apparently final absolute chasm between Dives and Lazarus? What if – if, and when, we truly hear Moses and the prophets, we find that we ourselves are actually rising from the dead?
