

## **Sermon for Sunday 25 September 2022 – Trinity 15**

**Pete Postle, Reader**

***Amos 6.1a,4-7; 1 Timothy 6.6-19; Luke 16.19-31***

May all I say and think be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

What a very opportune set of readings this week. On Monday we had the funeral of our Queen. I sat down, I thought I'll watch the first five minutes. I was there all day. It was somehow comforting that if you've done a fair few funerals, like I have, the words are familiar, and they seemed right, they should have been embracing her final journey.

And then within a day or two well, forget all that. The papers are full of money. They're worried about what our shiny, brand new Chancellor of Exchequer is going to explain, how everything can be put right by juggling taxes and government bonds. Government bonds are better known as IOUs - I owe to us. Here, in contrast, we get explained that one cannot serve both God and money. The New Testament story we just heard used to be titled the Parable of Lazarus and Dives. This refers back to the Vulgate, the first full Latin translation of the Bible by Saint Jerome, because Dives is simply the Latin for a rich man. So, early Bibles used to call our rich man Dives.

Now, what should we make of the tale? Is Jesus here giving us a valuable insight into the life hereafter, Hell and Heaven, separated by a great chasm? Well, no, actually, because the main part of this story isn't a Jesus original. He has borrowed an age old myth that can be traced back to Egyptian and Assyrian sources, but certainly a familiar folk tale, folklore, amongst the Jews of Jesus's time.

So you can imagine Jesus as here a pragmatist, realising that he cannot, should not attempt to dismantle longheld beliefs, longheld stories, but instead to revise them by building on those beliefs of his audience, using his skills as a preacher to take his audience's knowledge further and deeper, which then he does on this occasion by adding his own original sequel. That said, there is first some intriguing detail to sit through in that original folk story. When Lazarus dies, he's carried by the angels to be with Abraham. Older translators stick more closely with the original Greek and say that he's carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. See the first Old Testament reading.

This is a passing reference to how a most favoured guest, as a priest, would lie next to the host with his head virtually on the host's bosom. But the main point, of course, is that Lazarus goes to meet his ancestors. That's the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. In a peaceful area sometimes identified as Paradise and Dives, the rich man, goes to a much less pleasant place, separated by an impassably chasm.

Here it is called Hades, hell if you like, particularly in the Middle Ages, and in Jesus's time, this place of eternal damnation was often colloquially referred to as Gehenna, which was a real rubbish dump outside

Jerusalem, where the garbage eternally smouldered and burnt. You can see the lovely parallel there. But collectively, both Dives and Lazarus are in an afterlife called Scion. The belief code amongst the mainstream of Jews and Pharisees seems to be that this Scion, this afterlife, was a sort of stopover point on the way to the final resting place of souls. I say the mainstream Jews because the Sadducees, who were the ruling elite, did not believe that the dead and Scion had any contact with God or any such chance of resurrection.

Not surprisingly, the Sadducees advocated a system of rewards by God in this life instead, which would suggest that Jesus's parable here is securely aimed at them. Because the particular emphasis here is on the futility of pursuing the acquisition of wealth. You cannot serve God and money because it will hide away from you the real purpose of our lives on God's earth. So the rich man's sins are sins of omission. He hasn't actually committed any positive sinful act towards Lazarus.

He let him sit by his gate so he can pick up any scrubs that might be going. He hasn't told him to move on. He hasn't had him mistreated physically by his servants. But now in Hades, he even recognises Lazarus when he sees him across the way in paradise. But in life, he's ignored him and his plight. He's done nothing to help him. He's just another poor man in the street, another homeless person, perhaps. There are so many. What's so special about this one? Well, we don't know either.

There's nothing in this parable to suggest that Lazarus is a pious man, but we can sense that he has borne his hardships with dignity and fortitude. He has, in short, done the best with the little that he has been given, and that little has proven to be enough to earn him his place with Abraham at his bosom. Now, all, that's the old story. Now we come to Jesus's sequel; Dives sees what his life of pursuing wealth, pleasure and leisure has led you. He thinks of his five brothers. Perhaps in some way you can warn them in time so they might avoid his fate. So he asks Father Abraham for help. Could he send Lazarus, or more accurately, a resurrected Lazarus, if you think about it, there's a thought, to point out to them the error of their ways, to which Abram's answer is basically this - forget it. They have Moses' laws, they have the recorded words of the prophets. A resurrected poor man is not going to convince them, any the more. And there's a thought too; which is where we come in.

We too have the Mosaic law and in addition, and all importantly, Jesus's recommendations as to how best and compassionately we can interpret it. We too have the recorded words of the Old Testament prophets and also the incomparable interpretations of their prophecies by Jesus and the Gospels. So we should believe in all that they provide and then we shall have the faith, the trust in God to believe in that most precious resurrected man, Jesus of Nazareth.

He was poor enough in riches, but immeasurably wealthy in the riches of heaven. And who, by obeying the wishes of His Heavenly Father, proved to us that by love for him and for each other we can have sure hope that there is so much promise for us beyond those antiquated ideas of hell and paradise. Amen.