

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

Reflection – 15th Sunday after Trinity – 25th September 2022

Canon David Pickering

'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus.' (Luke 16. 19-20) And we know the rest; covered in sores, starving hungry and the local dogs licking his sores.

In the days of the Book of Common Prayer, today's gospel passage occurred every year on the First Sunday after Trinity. Now we only hear it once every three years in our triple cycle of readings. Whereas in the BCP it occurred in isolation among many other gospel passages, in our present lectionary it fits into a pattern of readings covering one of the key themes of St Luke's Gospel; concern for the poor and the danger of riches.

This can be found at the very beginning of Luke's gospel where the evangelist sets out this crucial issue in the words of the Magnificat, *'He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry things and sent the rich away empty.'* (Luke 1. 50 – 53)

This theme has also been there in a number of our recent Sunday gospels. Way back on the final Sunday of July we had the parable of the rich fool building his barns to store his riches so that he could enjoy a life of *'eat, drink and be merry'* (Luke 12.19). But this is all to no avail as he dies that night. The passage concludes with the words of Jesus: *'So it is for those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'* (Luke 13.21)

The following week we had further words from Jesus: *'Sell your possessions, and give alms. . . . For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also'*. (Luke 12. 31, 34) Then, at the end of August, we read the parable of the seats of honour at

a feast, concluding with the encouragement: *'when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'* (Luke 14. 13-14)

Last week we listened to the rather obscure parable of The Untrustworthy Manager who squandered his master's property. Many find this a difficult parable because it seems to promote fraud and deceit. But as I heard in a sermon in Salisbury Cathedral last Sunday, Jesus is perhaps speaking tongue in cheek and maybe with a smile, as he commends taking decisive action and commends the ingenuity of the worldly in dealing with the things of God. This perhaps can be understood when Jesus ends the parable with the words, *'You cannot serve God and wealth.'*

All these passages focus on the potential to make an idol of possessions, the vital obligation to be alive to the needs of poor, and the way in which alms are given and wealth dispersed. In some ways this theme in St Luke's gospel finds its climax in today's drama of the rich man and Lazarus.

In a number of ways it is quite unique as a parable, and therefore all the more interesting. At first glance it would appear that Jesus is giving a clear picture of the afterlife. In fact he is using a familiar folk tale of the time and giving it a new dramatic twist at the end.

A contemporary Egyptian version of the story ends with: *'He who has been good on earth, will be blessed in the kingdom of the dead, and he who has been evil on earth, will suffer in the kingdom of the dead.'*

Jesus changes this to: *'If they do not they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'* (Luke 16.31). Even the resurrection will make no difference to those who have not heeded the multiple teachings of the Old Testament about caring for the poor.

Another unique feature of this parable is that it's the only time we hear an actual name in any of Jesus's sayings. Lazarus means *'God helps'*. Lazarus certainly needed help, and we know his name, but in our modern world there are so many nameless people, who are the poor and outcasts of society. Yet it's interesting that although he's not named in the parable, in later tradition the rich man has been called *'Dives'*, the Latin for 'rich'. By contrast, today, through the glamourising of

the popular press, we often know the names of the rich and the wealthy while the poor and destitute remain nameless - and powerless.

This judgement on the rich and the injustices of society in our gospel are reflected in the other lectionary readings of the day. In both last week's and today's Old Testament reading Amos condemns the affluence and injustice of the people: *'Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and eat the lambs from the flock and calves from the stock.'* (Amos 6. 4) This was an extravagant misuse of resources. In Old Testament times sheep would only produce one offspring a year. Such corruption can only lead to exile. *'Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.'* (Amos 6.7) And just one of many lines from our psalm illustrates the same point: *'The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.'* (Psalm 146.9).

St Paul writing to Timothy clearly says, *'But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil'*. (1 Timothy 6.9-10)

We have to recognise that money and financial systems are a gift of God, and by his grace they should and can be used for the well-being of all. But we do have to ask, why is that some people and nations enjoy such affluence and yet so many of God's children are doomed to a life of suffering and poverty? Even in our own society why are people fearful of how they are going to feed their families in the coming months and heat their homes over the winter? Why do so many migrants leave their homes and risk dangerous journeys to try and find a more financially-rewarding way of life for themselves and their families? Something must be seriously wrong with the way the richness of God's bountiful creation is distributed and shared. Something must be highly amiss in the way the financial systems of the world are managed and worked. Our world economy is just not working when so many have to go without.

The 1980 Alternative Service Book had an intercession petition that read, *'Direct this and every nation in the ways of justice and peace; that men (people) may honour one another, and seek the common good.'* I was pleased to hear it used at the Eucharist at Salisbury Cathedral last Sunday. Jesus said that he came to bring

us life in all its fullness: *'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'*
(John 10.10)

Perhaps we need to renew our view of the image of God in all people and reorganise our world so that everyone may have a just and fair share in the common good.

Amen.