

Sunday between 25th September and 1st October [26]

Luke 16:19-31

The catechism, that document that attempts to describe what it means to be a Christian and in particular an Anglican and that many of us used in preparation for our confirmation, teaches us that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. This is a wonderful description which maintains the mystery of Jesus' teaching but what we mustn't forget is that although the meaning is heavenly it is also meant to be deciphered and understood by us in order to help us live our lives. It is an illustration, a working example of the abstract teachings and for us as Christians the parables are lovely comforting stories through which we have come to know Jesus.

So today we look at the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The story of ultimate richness and abject poverty. The rich man wasn't really cruel to Lazarus, he didn't become rich because he cheated Lazarus he simply was rich, we don't know why. Lazarus, similarly was poor, that was the status of his life we know nothing more about these men than this. We know they knew of each other but did not interact with one another, why would they, they moved in very different circles.

Now to Jesus' original audience this story would have come across very differently than it does to us. On hearing of these two men with their differing status the Jews would have said "yes, so what". That was the reality of the time, some people were rich, others poor but none of this bore any relation in their eyes to heavenly things. Being a devout Jew was important; being born into the race chosen by God was enough. There was no need to look beyond oneself to the needs of those around you as long as you didn't do anything to make their lives worse. That's not even such an unusual attitude to have today. Society tells us to do whatever we like as long as we don't hurt other people, but neglect as much as deliberate damage does much to hurt others and in fact we cannot live without damaging the people around us unless we make time to think about how our actions and omissions affect other people.

For Jesus' first audience, the context of how to behave was based on the great rule book of Judaism, the book of Leviticus, in which we hear the rules about not oppressing others, not putting a stumbling block in front of the blind, not keeping hold of someone's wages overnight. It doesn't say help the oppressed or improve the life of the blind or be generous when you pay wages, it simply says that you should not do wrong to other people. If someone else wrongs them, you are not liable to help.

So Jesus' audience were truly hearing a new thing in the story of the rich man and Lazarus because in this parable Jesus tells us that we are not only responsible for not deliberately damaging others but we are also going to be judged by our whole outlook towards our neighbour. Not only must we not make the lives of others more difficult deliberately, but we must also ensure their lives are not made more difficult by our ignorance of them. The rich man did nothing to contravene the letter of the Jewish law but he completely missed the spirit of the law.

When you read Leviticus, which you will be forgiven for not doing because it is very long-winded and seems a little lacking in relevance to us at times, but if you do read it you find something very interesting. The underlying spirit of all the picky little rules and regulations is to ensure that people live good lives. The Jewish people, for example, have lists of things they are not allowed to do on the Sabbath which in today's society can be a bit restrictive. However, then as it sometimes is now, people of other cultures never had a day off, their slaves never had a day of and life was an endless round of toil. In Israel no one worked on the Sabbath, certainly in Jesus' time, no Jew, slave, visitor, gentile, no one and thus everyone had a better life. The same themes run throughout Jewish law and they apply to all not just Jews living in Israel.

Jesus took the spirit of the law and showed the leaders where they had gone wrong. He preached love and forgiveness and respect not because these were new concepts for the Jewish people but because they had totally missed the point of the Torah laws.

So where does that leave us? There is nothing new here, you must have heard all this before. But, like the people Jesus was preaching to, we cease to understand the bigger picture sometimes and need to be reminded, and like the early Jewish law makers we need to look at the spirit of the laws and find out how that can be implemented in our lives. Looking at the example of the rich man's complete ignorance of Lazarus perhaps we need to look around at things we see that prick our consciences and do something about them, but also look for things we don't know about.

Much of what the Christian church does aims to redress the balance of fairness and justice on such practical issues. To feed the poor and care for the oppressed. We have many charities which do just that based off a Christian foundation, Boniface Care and Anglicare would be examples but there are many more. All of these charities try to present the lived reality of people we may otherwise not see and give us the opportunity to do better than the rich man in today's story by not ignoring the need placed before us, even though that need was not directly of our making.

But there is more to this message than just filling an envelope with money whenever we are asked. It is about living a life that seeks to put priority on the needs of others. To be proactive in helping those in need, to even be looking in for the need that isn't immediately obvious. Not everyone needs money, some need care in a different way. The housebound neighbour who needs company, we can find out if we can help there. The person who seems saddened who needs someone around with whom they can share their burden. The person who is ill and needs something as simple as help to go shopping. Need takes many guises, need that we do not cause is not need we ought to ignore.

Ignorance is not an excuse in God's eyes so we need to look at the world around us to try to find the Lazarus' who live among us. Government bears some responsibility but we are often told that charities will have to step in to fill the gaps left. We are one such charity, the love of God is the fount of all charity and that love is what we look to for inspiration, surely we should not just be answering this call but rather we should already be at the forefront of this work. There was a time when society relied on the church for supporting the poor and the sick and for educating its children, we are being asked to play a part in this sort of thing and this shouldn't be a chore for us. By our baptism we become part of the body of Christ and in that body we have a part to play in bringing about the kingdom, God's kingdom does not look like the scene in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Gods kingdom would see Lazarus and the rich man eat together, as Christ sat with them. We are charged to do what we can to make that scene a reality in this place, in our time.