

## **'Food For Thought' Article – The Great Divide - Luke 16:19-31.**



One of the overarching themes of Luke's gospel is the inclusive invitation to all people to become part of God's family. It is entirely correct that every church should be an inclusive community that welcomes people of all kinds to encounter Christ and live for him. So much depends on this if we are to fulfil the purposes of God.

But it is also right to ask what we are prepared to exclude. As Nigel Wright says, "Whereas we welcome all manner of people we do not embrace all manner of behaviour." (1)

The parable of the rich man, Lazarus and Abraham, starkly underlines this truth i.e. after death, there is a 'great, fixed, chasm' between the rich man and Lazarus, the poor beggar. There is separation, exclusivity and permanent division. In other words, there is judgement.

But let's look more closely at the characters in this parable.

### **The Rich Man in this Life, before Death.**

The rich man is nameless (Dives was attached later and is simply the Latin word for 'rich'). There is nothing wrong with being rich per se, but this man had serious shortcomings. He appears to be guilty of 3 things: -

1. He lived every day in self-indulgent luxury which he liked to parade. Only the very rich could afford purple cloth and even his underwear was made from finest Egyptian cotton! (2) He feasted sumptuously every day and his landed estate even had ornamental gates.
2. He was indifferent to the needs of the poor. Every day, when he went out, he passed the poor beggar but did nothing to help him.
3. He was ignorant of God. Tragically, his Bible stayed on the shelf, unread.

### **The Poor Man in this Life, before Death.**

Of all the parables Jesus told, this is the only one where an individual is given a name. The poor man is called Lazarus. The Good Samaritan, the Sower, the Father, The Elder and Younger Sons etc. are all anonymous, so to give this poor man a name is significant.

His name, in Hebrew, is **El'azar** (which we translate 'Lazarus', from the Greek) and surprisingly means '**the one whom God helps**' or '**God-help-me**'. I wonder what situation his parents were in to give him a name like that? And, given Lazarus' circumstances, he seems rather to be the ideal candidate for this award: 'The No.1 person in the world God **didn't** help.'

But Lazarus **did** have those who cared for him in this life. He had friends or family who came each day and laid him at the rich man's gate. Lazarus was too infirm to get to the rich man's gate himself, so 'was laid' there by his carers.

And here is a surprise. He was also cared for by dogs. We tend to read 'Even the dogs came and licked his sores' as adding insult to his injury, but not so. In the Greek it is 'But the dogs came and licked his sores'. The word 'but' is being used here to draw out a contrast. Whereas the rich man did nothing to help Lazarus, the dogs are being singled out as those who positively cared for him by licking his sores.

Dog saliva contains proteins called histatins which can defend against infection and there are other anti-bacterial micro-organisms and various enzymes that speed up the recovery of a wound. This is why dogs lick their wounds.

### **Lazarus in Heaven, after Death.**

Too poor to have had a funeral, Lazarus was carried directly by angels to Abraham's bosom ('kolpon'). This was the place of honour at Abraham's right hand. At the last supper, John occupied the same position on the bosom of Jesus as they reclined on the triclinium, the U-shaped couch. (Jn. 13:23)

It is here, in Abraham's bosom, that Lazarus is comforted.

### **The Rich Man in Hades, after Death.**

The dramatic tension between the rich man and Lazarus in this life is now continued in the afterlife. The great gulf fixed between them in this life is carried over into the next life.

Surprisingly, the rich man now seems to recognise Lazarus and knows his name. But he never addresses Lazarus at all; the rich man had never and would never speak to untouchables. Rather he wants Abraham to send Lazarus as a servant and wait on him in order to relieve his suffering. He says, “Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.” (vs 24)

It is here, in Hades, that the rich man is in anguish and has now become the beggar, uttering their traditional cry, ‘Have pity/mercy on me’. (See Lk. 18:35-38). There has been a radical reversal of roles between the rich man and Lazarus.

Notice too how the rich man plays his ‘racial card’, identifying Abraham as **his** Father as well. But this family link is not enough to save the rich man. In the eyes of God no racial identity has any intrinsic merit.

John the Baptist was faced with fellow Jews who had the same attitude as this rich man and he was vehement in his opposition to them. John said, “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.” (Lk. 3:8)

### **The Character of Lazarus.**

Although there is no intrinsic value as such in being poor, sick, ostracised etc., how we react to those circumstances, if or when they occur, is key. Lazarus never says a word throughout this parable; this in itself speaks volumes about the sort of man he was.

When on earth, Lazarus could have railed against God at the injustice of it all; he could have been consumed with self-pity at his circumstances; he could have been angry with the rich man for not helping him; he could have become very bitter and unforgiving towards people in general, especially those who said he was suffering because of his own sin. But no, he was gentle, longsuffering, uncomplaining.

### **The Character of the Rich Man.**

We have already seen how the rich man, in this life, lived in self-indulgent luxury with no thought of helping the poor and was ignorant of God’s requirements in the Law and the Prophets.

His attitudes were the same after death. There was no hint of repentance before Abraham or of any kind of apology to Lazarus. He continued to see Lazarus as an inferior who should be his servant and his errand boy.

**And now we come to what I believe is the main point of the Parable.**

Sometimes people say to me, “If only we saw more miracles, more people would become Christians.” This parable refutes that.

The rich man implores/begs Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his 5 brothers about the reality of Hades. But Abraham replies, “If they don’t listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” (vs 27-31)

Those whose hearts are hardened towards God are not going to be convinced by seeing miracles. The rich man saw Lazarus brought back to life but he didn’t repent. Jesus had raised another Lazarus from the dead but this had only intensified the desire of the chief priests and Pharisees to hunt Jesus down and kill him. (Jn. 11)

Of course, there **were** those who did believe in Jesus when they saw the works he performed, but there is no guarantee. If the message is rejected, miracles are unlikely to convince. The only call to repentance and faith is contained in the Bible; if people refuse that witness and testimony, there is no other.

What’s more, there is no opportunity for repentance after death. Destinies are fixed at death. The future is set because the past is unalterable. We have to call upon God while he is near ~ now, today, is the only acceptable time.

**Finally, What might this Parable say to us about mission to the poor?**

1. Locally, mission to the poor is found on our doorstep. It may be easy for us to overlook this for whatever reason. The parable presents a realistic social picture of today.
2. Globally, wealth is not distributed evenly and the gap between rich and poor countries is growing. Economic resources are often wasted by the rich and powerful on themselves whilst the tears of the poor and powerless are ignored.

So the challenge of this parable is to understand what the Law and Prophets say about our attitudes to the poor and to act accordingly while we are on earth. After death, it seems that not even the heat of Hades can melt assets which have been frozen in this life.

George Irving – Sept. 2022

(1) N. Wright, Encounter with God, (S.U., April-June 2022), p 105.

(2) I. Howard Marshall, The Gospel of Luke (Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster, 1978).