

St. Giles' & St. Andrew's Stoke Poges
Parables Sermon Series (Sunday 12/7/09)
The Rich Man & Lazarus Luke ch16 v19-31

One of the treats of my sabbatical, was flying to San Francisco on my way to Bethel Church in a really nice seat, as a result of the gift of many, many air miles. I had bags of room, the option of plenty of fine food and wine and masses of entertainment, even a bed for the return trip. It may never happen again, but it was a great treat.

By contrast when flying to Chicago some years earlier, it was a very normal seat, it seemed to take forever, there was no bed on the return and I got no sleep. In both cases, though, I was travelling purposefully to get somewhere I really wanted to be, and 8-10 hours on the plane was quite enough.

How strange then, that if life is like a long haul flight, it seems that for many people the enjoyment of their journey is more important than what happens at the final destination.

Two weeks ago we were looking at the parable of the Rich Fool and in the words of John Ortberg **the absolute necessity of arranging our life around what matters in light of our mortality and eternity.**

There (in Luke ch12) Jesus said **"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."**

Today we look at the Parable of the Rich man (Dives) and Lazarus (in Luke ch16). It seems that the Pharisees (who loved money) were Jesus' main targets and he precedes the parable by saying **"You cannot serve both God and money."**

Again we see how easy it is for us as human beings to set our hearts on the wrong things. For though there may be nothing wrong with eating good food, dressing well and flying in a nice seat, there is everything wrong with putting most of our time and money into things that will only Go Back into the Box... especially if we are the only beneficiaries.

An 18th Century Missionary wrote: **"I expect to pass through this world but once; any good thing therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now, let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."**

So let us listen to Jesus' description of a dreadful contrast between two individuals; a contrast that can still be easily found in the world today.

¹⁹"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

Both these men were Jews, both would have seen themselves as sons of Abraham, the rich man certainly would have known the scriptures from childhood...

He would have read (Proverbs 19:17) that "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord." But he seems devoid of compassion.

The contrast on earth was huge, but as Jesus continues, there is an even greater contrast after death.

²²The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴So he called to him, '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.'

How ironic that the one who had shown no pity should now be asking for pity... that the one who had not lifted his little finger to help Lazarus should now plead for the touch of Lazarus' finger tip.

²⁵But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

David Watson wrote: "God has always been on the side of the poor. It is not that God is partial towards the poor... however God is essentially a God of Justice and it is because the rich so often oppress or neglect the poor that God is especially concerned with the needs of the afflicted."

This parable should make us review our own lifestyles and spending patterns. As I read this week in a commentary on this passage: *The point is that the Pharisees - themselves lovers of money - were behaving towards the people Jesus was welcoming exactly like the rich man was towards Lazarus.*

But its main focus is not now with Lazarus, but with the state of the rich man. We may not like it, but this parable makes a point that is clear through all of Jesus' teaching. It is that there are eternal consequences to the way we live our lives.

More specifically, it is that we actually secure our place in Heaven or Hell in this life, there are no grounds to hope for a second chance after death.

This is what the Rich man discovers in Jesus' parable: ²⁷"He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, ²⁸for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

CS Lewis spoke of Hell, saying that the doors were "locked from the inside" and that it would be unfair for God to compel people who chose to live this life their own way to spend eternity living His way. That does seem only reasonable.

The subject of hell was one the Pharisees were rather keen on, they were not averse to 'threatening' people with it - yet Jesus elsewhere (Mt 23) says that they themselves were "children of hell."

Clearly both the Pharisees and Jesus believed in hell, but I think there is every likelihood that Jesus is using the Pharisees own view of hell against them in this particular parable.

In his teaching on hell, Jesus normally uses the word Gehenna, but here (v23) he uses Hades, a word referring to the place of the dead in the grave... maybe the Pharisees word? Whatever... the clear and fearful thing Jesus is suggesting is that the Rich man (perhaps like the Pharisees) may have deceived himself into thinking he was living God's way and was safe from hell, when he was not.

There is no suggestion that we can earn our way to Heaven, Jesus has paid the entry price for us, but there is every suggestion that the way we live our lives speaks volumes about what we really believe. Perhaps the Rich man wanted to enter a plea of ignorance, as many today might do, as if to say **"We did not know that how we lived mattered so much!"**

He certainly wanted his brothers warned and wonders if Lazarus can be sent as a messenger... again there is a huge irony here as I doubt that even a resurrected Lazarus would be let in to the rich man's house!

²⁹"Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' ³⁰" 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'
³¹"He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' "

The problem Jesus seems to be highlighting, is not with a lack of God communicating, but with a lack of people listening. In Deuteronomy God says through Moses: **"Do not be hard hearted or tight fisted towards your poor brother."** Through the prophet Isaiah (our OT Lesson) God says: **"Is not this the fast I choose... to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh."**

Neither of those passages need a huge amount of interpretation. But perhaps the cliché really is true, that "The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart."

The Rich man knew the words of Moses and the Prophets, but he clearly did not take them to heart... Why can I say that? Because the words he knew did not affect how he lived in relation to Lazarus, the beggar on his doorstep. Put like that we can all see the rich man's error, but can we tell if we are making the same error?

Dom Helder Camara was very accurate when he said: **"Money has a dangerous way of putting scales on one's eyes, a dangerous way of freezing people's hands, eyes, lips and hearts."**

I find myself in a very similar place to the place I was in with the parable of the Rich Fool, in saying that - **All that really counts is our relationship with God and the way we treat other people; the state of our souls and our deeds of love.** If that is true, then that is how we must do life.

Earlier in chapter 16 of Luke, Jesus tells another parable, the story of The Sacked Manager *who was commended for taking action in the nick of time to prevent total disaster*; so one commentator writes *the Pharisees - and anyone else tempted to take a similar line, are urged to change their ways while there's still time*. As long as we are alive, there is still time. Every "Today" we can choose to prioritize *the state of our souls and our deeds of love*.

As I quoted earlier from the 18th Century Missionary: "I expect to pass through this world but once; any good thing therefore that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature, let me do it now, let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

Let me say again, there is no suggestion that we can earn our way to Heaven, Jesus has paid the entry price for us, but there is every suggestion that the way we live our lives speaks volumes about what we really believe.

When the journey that we are on, this journey of life, finishes as it most surely will... when the plane lands... the most important focus for each human being in the world will not be how they found the flight, but do they really want to be at their destination.

The things that matter then, will not be how much have I got out of life, but how much have I put in? Was I rich towards God, or just towards myself? Do I know Him at all, or are we strangers? Have I been (however slowly) transformed little by little towards the likeness of Jesus and have I seen the Kingdom of Heaven bringing change on earth through me?