



Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe



Sunday 25 September 2022

READINGS

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6,14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

Jesus' Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

Our New Testament reading from the lectionary this week is taken from 1 Timothy 6: 6-19. In this letter, it seems as if Paul preaches this week's sermon for me! Paul's message to Timothy (for the church in Ephesus) reinforces the lessons of Jesus' parable about the rich man and the poor beggar named Lazarus, which is this week's Gospel passage from Luke 16:19-31. The letter includes one of the most well-known and often-quoted verses of scripture: For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.

1 Timothy 6: 6-10 could describe the rich man in Jesus' parable:

For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. 8 But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. 9 Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

The rich man is indeed content with his wealth, his feasting and his possessions. Until the time comes for his life on earth to end. That is when he learns how true it is that "we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it". Aware of his foolish and harmful desires, he begs that Lazarus could go and warn his family so that they don't follow his self-indulgent and destructive ways.

Scholars have cautioned us not to take this parable as a literal depiction of the afterlife and of personal salvation. It has many elements that signal to us that it is a story that fits the common patterns of story-telling, even recognisable to us in stories today: the extreme contrast between rich and poor, for example, creates an expectation in us of what is to follow. The story also includes recognisable characters like Father Abraham, and Lazarus whose name means "God has helped."

The fact that there is a reference to Hades is an element taken from Greek culture and mythology. Even the role reversal of the rich man being brought low and Lazarus seated with Abraham and the angels, is a story-telling technique that would have been familiar to the audience as it is to us. This parable is therefore not a textbook description – not a reliable or factual account of the after-life experience. To treat it as such that might be akin to taking cooking advice and recipes from the witches in the play Macbeth.

While there certainly is a warning about the temptations that come with wealth, which can make us self-indulgent and self-reliant, the rich man is not in hell because he was rich. The problem is that he knew better. The teachings of Moses and the prophets were there for him all along, as they are for us. He had been lured away from what Paul calls “godliness with contentment” – the basics of faith, love, and gentleness that were always the standard set for him and his community.

In the extract from the letter to Timothy we read:

17 Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. 19 In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

Here lies the conclusion and also the point where Paul’s “sermon” and mine diverge. Paul writes of a “firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life”.

As Paul points to the life of the coming age, I want to suggest that this is not just that time after death when we are compensated for our suffering on earth, or punished for our wrong doing. We can take hold of “the life that is truly life” by proclaiming God’s kingdom in word and action in this present day. The coming age is indeed the always-arriving day of the Lord that bursts in whenever and wherever WE become Good News for others.

Theologian Bruce Epperly calls this parable “a wakeup call ... a challenge to see if our personal lives and politics and economics create greater, or lesser separation, between the rich and poor, and between insiders and outsiders.” That great chasm that cannot be crossed is one of our own making. For Epperly, the tragedy of the parable is that the wealthy person had the resources to uplift the person literally on his doorstep, but was desensitised and uncaring. His failure or refusal to take note and to empathise created a gulf in this life that “echoed into eternity”.

There is a price to pay when we neglect others no matter the reason. Fear of eternal damnation is an equally selfish reason to heed the call of Moses, the prophets and of Christ who rose from death. That is what Jesus illustrates in the parable. In the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, we are part on one bundle of life, our humanity inextricably linked with that of others. When others are diminished, we are too. The price we pay is alienation from God’s highest call in our lives, the invitation here and now to “take hold of the life that is truly life”.