

The rich man and Lazarus – Luke 16:19-31

Paul Day

What's in a name?

This story this week is sometimes called the parable of Dives and Lazarus. Dives is simply Latin for rich man. To use it may imply the rich man had a name, but one of the points of the story is that this rich man is not named – only the beggar at the gate is named – Lazarus. Lazarus was a common name. There is no link between this Lazarus and the one who Jesus raised from the dead.

'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, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." '

We all know a Lazarus.

As we go into Birmingham, or even Solihull, we see him. Huddled in a shop doorway wrapped in a dirty blanket to keep warm. A plastic cup on the ground in front of him into which a sympathetic passer-by has thrown some coppers.

Maybe a dog alongside him to help keep him safe. We walk on by; perhaps we try to look the other way as we try to suppress those words that come into our mind – “it’s his own fault”, “why doesn’t he get a job?”, “I won’t give him any money as he’ll just spend it on drugs or alcohol”.

Maybe we’ve also seen him when we’ve been on holiday. As we leave our hotel, or outside the tourist attraction or on the train station. He’s all around us in every country and every city and every town.

Yes, we all know - or at least know of - a Lazarus. Lazarus is our neighbour.

We may not be dressed in ‘purple and fine linen’; we may not ‘feast sumptuously every day’, but in comparison to the Lazarus we know, we are rich. In the story Jesus tells I am sure we all in some way align ourselves with the rich man.

The storyline would have been very familiar to Jesus’ listeners. There was a well-known folk tale that fortunes in this world would be reversed in the world to come. So although it is clearly a story about wealth and poverty and how we treat wealth and respond to poverty - with many similarities to the parable of the sheep and the goats, the gospel reading we had on Sunday - it is unlikely that this is the main point Jesus was making, even though it’s a very important one. Nor is the reference to the flames or torment of Hades something for us to get stuck on – Jesus often used exaggeration or hyperbole as part of his story telling.

The story is being told to the Pharisees and, for them, the real point that Jesus wanted to make comes in the final lines of the story. The rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers about what might happen to them. Abraham refuses, saying they have Moses and the prophets – they can surely listen to their teaching. The man goes on – they will listen if someone returns from the dead. But Abraham is adamant. If they do not listen to what they can hear now – from Moses and the prophets – they will not listen even if someone did return from the dead.

At the time Jesus was being criticised for the company he kept. He spent time with outcasts, the poor, beggars and ‘sinners’. This wasn’t what the Pharisees expected from a holy man of God. But with this parable Jesus is saying that there is nothing new in what he is doing. He is simply fulfilling the teachings of

Moses and the prophets. He is living out the love that God has for all people – as proclaimed time and time again by the ancient prophets.

All through the Old Testament we can read of this.

The phrase *“Love your neighbour as yourself”* was from Leviticus, one of the books of Moses. And in Deuteronomy, another of the books of Moses, we read – *“I command you – Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land”*

In Isaiah we read

*“Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”*

And in Proverbs

*“Those who despise their neighbours are sinners,
but happy are those who are kind to the poor.”*

By what he is doing and what he was teaching Jesus was urging people to do what was laid out clearly in the teachings of Moses and the prophets – to look out for those in need and to share the love of God with them. If people couldn’t understand what was quite plain in scripture, then someone returning from the dead would not convince them.

The parable then was a criticism of the Pharisees and the way they behaved – placing respectability and honour above all else. They would have seen the rich man as a named individual, but the poor as a mass – not individuals named and loved by God. But there was still time for them to change the way they lived – all they had to do was to listen to the clear teaching of Moses and the prophets.

And for us today the parable helps us to see that the Old and New Testaments present a continuous story of God's dealings with humanity. We often labour under the misapprehension that Old and New Testaments present different truths about God, but Jesus is making it plain here that there is a consistency. God is concerned about everyone – from those we might consider the greatest to the least. And he calls on us to live lives that reflect this truth.