

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus – Luke 16: 19-31 – 26 Sept 2010

Introduction

As a young person, I was not well travelled except, to some extent, within Australia. Through my years as a Naval Chaplain I had opportunity to go to many countries and for the first time I was exposed to masses of people and in some places incredible poverty. I remember being in Mumbai (Madras) and coming off the ship and being swamped by the 'tuk tuk' drivers wanting to take you to where-ever you were going. Then the nightmare of travel on the roads, where back in the early 90's hundreds died in accidents every week. We played cricket in the main stadium against a President's 11, which was great fun, even though we got thrashed as they had a host of test players. Lunch was a variety of twenty or more curries, served in large silver serving pots, with them being labelled from savoury to exceedingly fiery. There was an abundance of food, served for us by stewards.

After the match we were driven elsewhere for a function and as we went through the streets you saw the shanties, the tin, wooden and cardboard shelters on the footpaths that were the homes to tens of thousands back then. The extremes of wealth and plenty compared to the poverty on the streets was incredibly stark and has left that image burnt into my brain all these years on.

The next day a group of us spent time at an orphanage run by the Sisters of Mercy with an Australian nun heading it up. There were hundreds of children there, some mutilated by family so that they would be more appealing for begging. These children and early teenagers were being taught skills so that they would not have to beg and could later earn a living. Some of the ship's company did painting, electrical work, plumbing or simply played with the children at the orphanage. We couldn't do much, but we could do a few things. We had also brought several pallets of goods from Australia for the orphanage so it was a joy to be able to deliver this.

Why this story – well re-reading the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus brought back this and other memories of the huge gulf between the rich and the poor.

No doubt many of you have far more dramatic stories than this from your own experiences. Some of these even from within our own country.

Preliminary Reflection on the Passage

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus narrates the very reversals of fortune that we find promised in the Magnificat (Luke 1:52-3 "He has brought

down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but sent the rich away empty.” Also it is mentioned in the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6: 20 -26) which includes “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be satisfied” and “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.” As such this parable drives home Luke’s relentless concern for the faithful stewardship of goods. Justice is presented in an eschatological balancing of the scales: those who have suffered in need are made full and those who have revelled in excess are left empty.

What this parable adds to the general injunction to generosity is a narrative in which the very proximity of the rich and poor comes to the foreground. Rich and poor are not left as vague generalities but are depicted as two men, one inside the gate of abundance and one outside. Their close proximity accentuates the fact that Lazarus seems invisible to the rich man. Even after death, when the rich man gazes across the abyss to see Lazarus in Abraham’s care, he speaks in the third person – as if he were not there. The reversal of roles in that the Rich Man has no name but the poor man is named as Lazarus is also stark. Hence part of the role of the parable is a great moral challenge of seeing and then making visible, the invisible suffering of the world. Indeed this is one of our most important moral challenges today. Our global network of communication allows us to be more aware of the world’s suffering than ever before, but we have become adept at ignoring the suffering with an overload thrown at us through the media. There seems to be so many disasters around the world that we don’t know where to begin and people are nameless and faceless so we file it in the ‘too difficult to cope with’ category. Only when those suffering have a name, when they touch our hearts do we allow ourselves to be drawn into their suffering and this is not too often.

Teaching from the Parable

There are at least four areas of teaching in the parable, probably more. Most parables that Jesus shares have a story with a specific meaning. This one appears to have a number of foci.

1. The Great Chasm.

As already mentioned the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor is one of the most important issues of our day. The intrepid ‘moral of the story’ expressed in this parable is that if you do not cross the gaping chasm between the rich and the poor in this life, you surely will not be able to do it in the next. This is a clear message to us in our affluent society. Look at the needs of the poor. See the names and the faces and respond as good stewards of what God has given us. This parable is urging ‘the haves’ to do justice now, for there is no opportunity later.

2. Good News to the Poor

No matter how we exegete it or attempt to soften its message, this parable is a warning to the wealthy and a word of comfort and hope to the poor. Jesus’

identity as a prophet who was anointed to “preach good news to the poor” in Luke 4:18 is lived out in this parable. Jesus spoke out about the real inequities of his day by his stern and unrelenting admonition to the wealthy who failed to share their earthly resources. Jesus had rich friends, we know that, but here he reminds us all not to hoard our wealth purely for ourselves as long term that is useless and of no earthly use to others, let alone ourselves.

3. The Hard Work of Transformation

By the parable’s end, the rich man is in a place of torment, yet he is still entrenched in his privileged attitude. He still wants to order Lazarus to do something for him. In fact he speaks to Abraham to try to get Lazarus to do his bidding. His attitude, even through his torment, has not changed – how sad! Abraham’s words back to him suggest that stepping out of one’s privilege is perhaps one of the most difficult journeys of transformation. Change does not come easily but is required here both in our treatment of money and our treatment of others. The Rich Man has not learnt this lesson. Implied for us is: ‘Have we?’

4. True Faith

Abraham’s words, there is a ‘great chasm’ between you and ‘us’ in verse 26 makes, in this case, Abraham the judge here. The great teacher puts Abraham, the parent of faith, in the role of judge. What we know from the parable is that because of his lack of action, compassion and insight, the Rich Man cannot cross over to the place of faith, nor does he have a place by Abraham’s side. For the righteous Jewish person this was inconceivable. Also that poor Lazarus could be part of the God’s kingdom over and above the Rich Man is the reverse of the normal. To an impoverished group of people this parable offers great comfort that God sees their suffering and is on their side. To most of us, however, steeped in a consumer society and possibly often on the wrong side of the chasm, this parable is as hard to hear today as it was two thousand years ago – do we really want to hear it and the implications it may bring for us in a social justice setting?

Prayer

Lord, give us the wisdom to see the true value of the things we have, the judgement to see the worthlessness of so much that the world cherishes and the grace to let go of all those things that hinder us from the truly abundant life.

Then give us the grace to share what we have with those in need so that we might please you and show our allegiance to your kingdom and the love of your ways. Amen.