

CCV Rich Man and Lazarus

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your side, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Our Gospel reading is very transferrable to modern Vienna, because it's about extreme wealth, next to extreme poverty. Imagine a grand house in the centre of Vienna. It has a large garden, a swimming pool and several live-in domestic staff. There's a Ferrari in the drive and La Fite in the cellar. The owner has done well for himself.

But then think of the person who cleans his car or mows the grass in his garden. He works as hard as he can, but he's still always worried about money. He doesn't always know quite how he'll manage to get a good dinner for his kids. There is black mould on the walls of his flat, but he can't get the landlord to do anything about it. It's getting into his children's lungs and he can hear them coughing at night. He lives in constant fear of a knock on the door and difficult questions about his immigration status. In the story, he's called Lazarus.

The story is about what happens to them after they die. This immediately makes the story strange and counter-cultural. We don't like talking about death much in our society, but it is utterly strange to us to talk with brutal, practical realism about what comes after it. Yet that is exactly what Jesus does and if we can't do it in church, where can we? Part of what we do when we gather on Sundays is not just to prepare ourselves for the week ahead, but to prepare ourselves for eternity.

So, what happens?

v.22.

Immediately, their fortunes are reversed. The rich man, who lived in pomp and luxury, a celebrity admired by everyone, is simply buried, but Lazaraus, who was ignored and spat on, is escorted by a procession of

angels to feast with Abraham, the great hero of the Jewish people. Then it continues.

vv.23-24.

Perhaps you're thinking. 'Well, Michael, this is metaphorical isn't it? Nobody literally believes in the fires of hell anymore, do they?' Well, there certainly is metaphorical, symbolic, picture language going on here, but, as I may have said before in this pulpit, Biblical metaphors must be metaphors for something real. If I say 'my eyes light up when my wife enters the room', that is a metaphor or word picture if my expression actually does change. If I continue to stare glumly at my computer, it is not a word-picture, but a lie. I don't know exactly what the fire in this passage is a word picture for. I don't know exactly what hell is like. But the Bible consistently suggests that it's real and that fire is a good picture for it. Even if there aren't physical flames in hell, fire is the image Jesus uses to describe it. This story tells us, wonderfully, how not to go there.

Why is the rich man in hell?

Firstly, because he ignored Lazarus and, secondly, because he ignored the Bible.

He ignored Lazarus.

vv.24-25.

This doesn't mean it's a sin to be rich. We see that very clearly in the previous parable, which would have been last Sunday's reading, except we changed it because it was St Matthew's day. Wealth is a gift, and a gift to be used to serve God and others. We benefit so much as a church from the generous giving of those who are relatively well-off. It's great to be rich, but it's so important to use what we're given wisely.

The story isn't saying that we can buy ourselves out of hell, as if a certain amount of money is enough to bribe a God who is infinitely holy and

mighty and good. God isn't a slot machine who we can just put money into and automatically, mechanically, get blessing and salvation out.

But wise use of our money is a way of saying to God, 'God, I know I'm not perfect, but I want to follow you, please forgive my sin and welcome me into your kingdom.' In that sense, it's a bit like what we do at this communion table. In technical terms, it's sacramental. It's something we do to humbly say to God that we want to follow him and be part of his family.

Of course, remembering the poorest people is about far more than just money.

It's interesting that Jesus gives this character the name Lazarus. He's the only character with a name in any of Jesus' stories and of course, scholars spend forests' worth of paper on why and what the name might mean. I think a big part of what it means is that Jesus knows his name. I wonder how many names we know of people of lower status than us. I was convicted while preparing this sermon about someone who cleans my office in Innsbruck. She knocks on my door about twice a week to empty the bins and has done so every week for the last two years. I asked her her name when I started the job two years ago and I'm ashamed to say I've now forgotten it.

Do we know the names of the Lazaruses in our lives? It's so easy to let the people who do menial jobs become simply machines made out of human flesh. But to Jesus they're people. He knows their names. The rich man is in hell, because he ignored Lazarus.

But if the first reason the rich man ends up in hell is that he ignored Lazarus, the second is that he ignored the Bible.

*Vv. 27-31.*

The rich man says, 'Please send Lazarus, let him come back from the dead, to warn my brothers.'

But Abraham says no, a man coming back from the dead will do no good. What they need to do is listen to Moses and the prophets, in other words, to listen to the Bible. If they ignore the Bible, a man rising from the dead won't convince them.

I wonder if you've ever said or thought, 'If I see a miracle, then I'll really believe. If I'd been alive in Biblical times and seen the feeding of the five thousand or the parting of the red sea, or even the resurrection of Jesus, then I'd really believe. But you can't ask me just to believe because of a book.'

Well, Jesus says the opposite. Jesus says that, even if you'd been there, you wouldn't have believed. After all, many people who were there didn't believe. Many, many people saw Jesus' miracles and didn't believe. Possibly another reason for the name Lazarus is to link to the other Biblical character, Lazarus. That's the Lazarus who Jesus did miraculously raise from the dead. What happened after Lazarus rose from the dead. Did everyone believe? No, they started plotting to kill him. If you don't believe me, it's in John chapter 11. You can look it up at home.

The rich man is in hell because he not only ignores Lazarus, he ignores the Bible.

This doesn't mean we all have to become brilliant Biblical experts, who memorise every verse by heart and understand all intricacies of ancient books. The point is that we remember the one simple thing the Bible tells us to do. The Bible tells us to trust in Jesus and follow him. When we do that, we'll want to express it by remembering our poorest neighbours.

The rich man is in hell because he ignores the poorest people and ignores the Scriptures.

Often Christians argue about which is more important, believing the Bible or helping the poor, spreading the Gospel or serving the helpless, orthodoxy or generosity, theology or justice. Jesus doesn't seem to want us to argue about which is more important, he wants us to do both.

Indeed, doing both might be the only way not to go where the rich man goes.

Of course, we'll have different emphases and passions. Some of will feel more drawn towards one and others to the other. If you emphasise the Gospel and believing the Bible, you might call yourself a conservative Christian or perhaps an evangelical Christian. If you emphasise generosity and justice, you might call yourself a liberal or a progressive Christian. We have both groups of people in this church and that's great. We need each other. We need each other to remind each other that both are important. The rich man needed both of them and so do we.

This passage is a stark warning of the reality of hell, but wonderfully no one ever needs to go there. Indeed, and this could be a whole other sermon, Jesus has gone there so we don't have to. The way not to go there is simply to trust in Jesus and follow him. We don't need to know everything there is to know about the Bible, we just need to respond to its invitation to trust in Jesus. We don't need to solve all the social and economic problems of the world, we just need to try to try do what we can to remember the poorest people. If we do that, we are assured by Jesus that we, like Lazaraus, will be carried by angels to glory, to feast with the heroes of God's people. Amen.