

## Sermon at St John's, after Official Opening of St John's Centre, 29.9.19

*Lord, what we know not teach us; what we have not, give us; and what we are not make us - and all for your glory's sake. Amen*

It's a parable that raises many searching questions – and speaks into the heart of our world, as well as into the challenge of being Christ in the world today, which is the Church's primary task. And, if uncomfortable, it's a parable also deeply relevant to us, at St John's, at a time when we officially open our new Church Centre, and enter into a new era in our relationship with our local community.

So I want to start by articulating some of these searching questions... before going on to read the parable, imaginatively, in new ways... and thinking about what God's word might actually have to say to us here, about the subtly shifting values of wealth and poverty in the mission of the Gospel & the life of God's Kingdom. For in God's economy, as the parable reveals to us, and in God's searching judgement, all is not as it seems... and so often the first will be last, and the last first.

So, first then, some uncomfortable questions prompted by the parable of the rich man and Lazarus:

- How do we, in a world which often exalts wealth and money as the highest public good avoid the delusions and pitfalls of wealth?
- As we think of the rich man dressed in purple, with the poor man Lazarus at his gate, who are the people – I wonder - at our gates today: as individuals, a church or a nation?
- How might we, in a confused and materialist world, dare to discover where true value lies, as well as reaching out to those who are poor or marginalised, and caring for creation itself?
- +Thinking about the opportunities which the rich man had to make a difference – his wealth and his religion – how might we, as a church, use the resources that have been given to us to further God's kingdom? For it's not that money in itself is evil, it's what we do with it that matters. As the scriptures remind us, we take nothing out of this world, and a day of reckoning will one day come upon us all.

I'm fascinated by the parable of Dives – as he's often called, but not so in Luke – and Lazarus, because of its dramatic detail, the great reversal of conditions (after death), and the profound irony of the imaginary dialogue between the rich man and Abraham, to whom he asks for mercy.

In the parable, Jesus takes a familiar folk tale and adapts it by adding an unfamiliar twist at the end... The rich man dresses in fine linen and feasts sumptuously every day; and at his gate lies Lazarus, covered in sores, who longs to satisfy his hunger, even from what falls from the rich man's table.

We don't hear about the relationship between them or even whether they talked to each other. But we can imagine that the rich man was indifferent and barely noticed his guest. For when they die, the rich man is carried down to Hades, and Lazarus to Abraham's side in heaven. Their conditions have been reversed, and whereas before Lazarus suffered neglect, he is now at Abraham's bosom; and the rich man who, previously, lived a life of riley, is now in torment – and wishes he were by Abraham's side, with Lazarus, whom previously he had ignored and discarded as rubbish.

And there is a chilling detail in dives' dialogue with Abraham, from the depths of Hades, when he asks Abraham to send someone to his five brothers, still living, to warn them to live righteously and generously, because judgement is coming, and actions have consequences: not only in this life, but in the life to come. For dives challenges Abraham that surely if someone goes back to them from the dead, they will listen?

+ Yet think about the hearers of this story, proclaimed in the Gospel, after Jesus' resurrection; how many of them, and us, are really willing to listen to the one – Jesus Christ, Lord of the Church – risen from the dead? How willing are we listen to his words of warning and exhortation, echoing through the scriptures, and calling out to be embedded in our real-life experience. It is a chilling challenge to us, to reflect carefully about how we respond to Jesus' words in the Gospel today.

So let's reimagine the parable for today... 'There was a rich nation which worked tirelessly to accumulate, for itself, as much wealth and natural resources as it could come by, and by whatever means presented itself: whether by hook or by crook. And it enjoyed some large measure of success, such that its wealthiest citizens prided themselves by living in large and ornately decorated houses, eating the best foods, and accumulating wardrobes full of the finest clothes – far more than they would ever be able to wear.

And at its gates, both within its towns and cities, as well as on its furthest shores and crammed on fragile vessels on the seas, lay the poor, the neglected, the wounded and disillusioned. Some were homeless or crammed into poor and insanitary housing; others were refugees, fleeing conflicts elsewhere, increasingly caused by a changing climate, effected by the fallout from the rich nation's lifestyle choices. Some had not succeeded in playing the game, and others had fallen by the wayside because of the corruptions of wealth or the illicit temptation of drugs.

But the ones who struggled most, on the day of reckoning, were not necessarily those who had succeeded or accumulated possessions, but those of them who had forgotten where true value lies, and neglected generosity, justice and love for the poor, sharing what they had. And similarly, the ones on the other side of the fence, who struggled to find redemption were not those who had

fallen by the wayside or made mistakes in their lifestyle choices – for God loves the poor - but those who had closed themselves off to God’s mercy.’

Jesus, in the Gospel, has a great deal to say about wealth and poverty, and it’s often hard-hitting; like last week’s phrase, ‘You cannot serve God and wealth.’ But what matters, it seems to me – and this is how I read the parable – is remembering where true value lies, and sharing what we have with others, including those who are poor. Yes, it matters that our true value comes not from money, but from our relationship with the living God. And it matters also, that we discover the church – God’s commonwealth of love, Christ’s Body on earth – to be a new community, in which all have a place, all belong, and God’s gifts are shared, for the good of all, especially the poor and the neglected.

And that is why I believe our new Community Centre is so vital, because through it – working with people of peace – we will be helped to better live out the Gospel we proclaim. Whether it’s welcoming different groups in, hosting the homeless night shelter this winter, running parenting schemes, or community lunches, the opportunities are endless. For we will be speaking of a Gospel which, unlike our society, does not exclude or divide, but which welcomes all, loves all and shares with all, irrespective of people’s backgrounds; building bridges, rather than walls. Bridges between people, all of whom are made in the image and likeness of God, and belong together in God’s house.

Some years ago, having not experienced poverty first hand in my childhood, I spent several years working – in various different spheres of society – with the poor and on issues of poverty, and especially how the church serves and empowers the poor. So I found myself, variously, working with young people from some of our poorest estates, struggling with unemployment; researching a report on poverty and problems with our benefit system; involved in local government anti-poverty work, and helping to set- up a community partnership on a large housing estate on the edge of Manchester.

And I say this, because I learnt so much and received so much; more than I could have possibly have imagined - finding Christ in the many encounters, as well as the costly reality – often – of brokenness, as well as passion, hope and joy.

For as Pope Francis says, as Christians – whether rich or poor – we’re all called to build a truly welcoming Church, a transformed community, with, of and for the poor; one that listens to the poor, promotes human flourishing for everyone, and honours Christ, who became poor for us.

+I want to end with a statement of faith that I first met when I was involved in this work, as a volunteer with Church Action on Poverty - a statement that takes the heart of today’s Gospel parable, and helps to make it real, flesh and blood, in the life of our Church today:-

'We believe that God, in whom we live and move and have our being, has chosen to reveal the meaning of our human story. God so loved this world as to send his Son Jesus Christ, and in him the true story – the Kingdom that he preached – is both revealed and made possible.

We believe that when we pray 'Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth', we commit ourselves to be part of this story-in-the-making and we bind ourselves to work for an order which mirrors, realises and incarnates the realities of the Kingdom.... Our human tragedy is to set out hearts on mirages or look-alikes of the real Kingdom. We turn God's gifts into idols which promise life but cannot deliver it.

We believe that God's Spirit speaks through the cries of the poor and the vulnerable, to expose our illusions and break their power over us; calling us to our proper task of working for the emerging Kingdom, restoring us to the human story's authentic theme.'

So be it Lord, in and through us, and by your Word. *Amen*