

First Sunday after Trinity 7 June 2015 St Peters Pretoria Luke 16:19-31

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.'

And besides all this, between us and you a great gap has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'

Dear sisters and brothers,

When Prof Klaus Nürnberger phoned me on Friday asking whether I could help out with this service, I immediately started to make a plan to do so. I love to preach, I love to celebrate a service with you. My wife was sad that I would no longer go along to the circuit brass band festival, but supported the decision.

Then I sat down to read the sermon text. Suddenly I regretted to have agreed

to preach. This is not a nice text to preach on! Luther said that it is terrible to listen to. "So ist denn dieses Evangelium schrecklich zu hören" Should I wriggle myself out of the commitment again? Or chose a different, easier text?

But then, it also can be an exciting challenge to tackle the text and see what it wants to tell us.

We only find this parable in the gospel of Luke. There is no introduction to it, and also no conclusion. It just "sits there" - almost like a stumbling block. It reminds me of an occasion where I almost had an accident. A truck had lost a large box and it was lying in the middle of the road - no warning - it just lay there. And indeed, that is what this text is - a stumbling block, an irritation - especially if I as reader belong to those who have sufficient, and daily see utterly poor people on the streets as I go about my business. Can't we "move it aside"?

I could now go on and summarise the message of the gospel with two statements: The rich will go to hell, the poor will go to heaven. Amen

Is that the message of this story? The story has ancient Egyptian roots, and in those the message indeed is in that line.

But in Luke Jesus gives the story some different twists. These changes are important. The poor man gets a name. In no other parable do the people have names. His name is Lazarus - which means: God helps

Of similar importance is the addition of the discussion that happens between Abraham and the rich man. "Please warn my brothers" he states. "They have all the warnings they need", Abraham responds. Moses and the Prophets show them the way. The rich man knows Moses and the prophets. He knows that these were not sufficient to warn him, nor will they be to warn his brothers. They need more - a message from beyond, a powerful sign, a dead man talking. Then comes the closing statement: 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'

This part of the text links us up with the watchword of today, where Jesus says to his disciples: Whoever listens to you, listens to me, and whoever rejects you, rejects me. (Luke 10:16)

I can understand the request of the rich man. When we share the gospel with others, we sometimes would like to have a powerful sign to convince them to listen. Like this morning: If suddenly Jesus walks in through the wall, or

better still, comes down through the ceiling - surely then every one of us would listen!?

Well - it depends! It depends on whether we like what we hear or not. If he says: I love you, I forgive you - then we will smile and jump and rejoice.

But if he says: Love each other, care for the needy, share what you have - I think then we would start debating on how the pastor accomplished the trick so that it looked as if Jesus was there.

The message of this parable is not an easy one. But it also is not a stumbling block, a “lost box” that is blocking the flow of the gospel of Luke. It actually fits quite well into the gospel. Luke, more than any other gospel, shows the compassion that Jesus had for the poor and needy. Even more than in the other gospels the message of Jesus is clear, that we should love, that we should care for others. But why does it refer to Moses and the prophets and not to Jesus’s teachings? The old Testament is quite clear that God wants his people to be a caring community. The commandments clearly point in that direction. They are not about me and God, but about me and my fellow human beings.

Just prior to this parable Jesus says that Moses and the prophets “were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, ... It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law.”

Some followers of Jesus might have thought that with Christ the message of Moses and the prophets has become irrelevant. Now the gospel counts, and it says that God loves me, forgives me and everything is OK.

But, says Jesus with this parable: The Gospel does not nullify God’s concern for all humans. The message of care towards another, of helping the poor is as relevant as ever.

That is, where I believe, the name “Lazarus” comes in. It is not just a name. “God helps” It seems to be a bitter irony that the man about whom no-one cares, who exists in utter misery, is called: God helps! How does God help? Not by dropping food through the ceiling. Not by sending angels to wash the wounds. God blesses others with goods and gifts, so that through them those who don’t have, can experience that God helps.

To put it differently: God loves me. But that is not a one on one relationship. God wants this love to flow through me to others.

Jesus is my Saviour. He died for me, forgave my sins - and he wants his love, his forgiveness, to flow through me to others.

At the time of Jesus wealth was regarded as a sign of God’s blessing. Thus, in the ears of the listeners, the rich man was blessed by God. At his doorstep is a sick, helpless person - “God helps” is his name. Do the listeners make the connection: God blesses - God helps?

The rich man did not. Do we?

Yesterday’s watchword gave me yet another angle to understand this story for us today. It is from Proverbs: Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Proverbs 3:27 (Weigere dich nicht, dem Bedürftigen Gutes zu tun, wenn deine Hand es vermag. Sprüche 3,27) This parable is a challenge. The challenge is not to feed and wash Lazarus ever so often, but to ask: is there a way to get Lazarus back on his feet? He had no dignity left - dogs were licking his wounds. Is there a way to restore his dignity?

It is common knowledge that in South Africa the gap between rich and poor is growing vastly. Incredibly many people live in utmost misery.

Government grants and soup kitchens can alleviate the immediate need - but they do not restore dignity.

Last week I attended a conference of all Lutheran Churches in Africa in Moshi, Tanzania. One key note speaker said: Africa has every thing it needs: Wonderful people, resources. The only thing that it lacks is good leadership. What power do you have to make a fundamental difference to the dignity of others? How can my blessings - not only money, but also knowledge, education, power, position - become a blessing to Lazarus?

Too many leaders, and too many of us, like the rich man, care for themselves at the expense of others.

I mentioned that Luther called this gospel “terrible to listen to” - but that is only half the sentence. The full sentence is: “it is terrible to listen to if you do not believe with your heart” (“denen, die nicht von Herzen glauben”)

With this story Jesus does not want us to tremble and fear hell, but challenges us, who believe with our hearts in him as our saviour, to ask: How can my blessings make a difference to others, so that they know: God helps?

Amen

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