

The Chasm and the Cross

A sermon on Luke 16:19-31 by Nathan Nettleton, 25 September 2022

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Message

The cross of Jesus can teach us to recognise the innocence of suffering, and so enable us to recognise our own dependence on God's mercy and to stop digging our own hells.

Sermon

The story we heard Jesus tell about the rich man and Lazarus in our gospel reading tonight has been responsible for an awful lot of literalistic speculation about “the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell” (Reinhold Niebuhr). It is not the only biblical passage to refer to luxuries in heaven and fire in hell, but it is one of the most graphic depictions and one of the few to focus on a contrast. However, to focus on this passage as a source of information on the specific conditions of heaven and hell, or even of the criteria for entering one or the other, would almost certainly be to misunderstand what Jesus was doing and saying with this story.

If Jesus had started a story by saying, “There were two Irishmen who arrived at the Pearly Gates and waited in line to see St Peter ...” it would never have occurred to us to start taking the details literally and start drawing maps of the geography of heaven on the basis of them, but it seems fairly clear that that is pretty much what Jesus was doing here.

He has taken a conventional popular folktale, and given it a teak of his own to make a point. And the point is certainly not the descriptions of conditions in heaven and hell, or even their existence. When Jesus takes popular folktales and reworks them, the point is always in one or both of two places. Sometimes it is the application of the story to a specific audience, perhaps one that no one else would have thought it applied to. Or sometimes the point is in a new twist that Jesus puts on the story; a twist which usually, and certainly in this case, comes at the end. In this case, I think Jesus is doing both, and setting up a conversation between the two.

The audience is clearly identified just before tonight's extract began. We've just had the parable that we heard last week, the parable of the shift business manager, and Jesus's comments about not being able to serve both God and money. Then on the tail of that it says, “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them....,” and what he says to them is a couple of preliminary sayings and then this story. So we have a story of a rich man being sent to hell being told to a group of rich, but proudly religious men. Some of the implications of that are pretty obvious, but I'll come back to them shortly.

At the end of the story, the rich man calls from the hellfire asking for Lazarus to be sent back from the dead to warn his five brothers of the torments awaiting them if they don't turn their lives around. That part may still even be part of the popular folktale. It is a lot like Charles Dickens' depiction of Scrooge and the ghosts in *A Christmas Carol*.

But the real twist comes when the rich man is told that there is no point in sending Lazarus back, because if they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, then they wouldn't be convinced even if someone did rise from the dead. Not only is this a pretty clear reference to Jesus's own resurrection and the fact that many would remain unconvinced by it, but Jesus is pointing out

that the hard-heartedness that makes us so unwilling to reach out from our wealth to those in poverty goes way beyond simply being unconvinced that there might be future consequences.

In addressing this story to some money-loving Pharisees who took issue with his applications of the parable of the shifty business manager, you can see how Jesus is building this story on the foundation of that one. The shifty business manager might have been a crook, but he did use the money at his disposal to help some other people, even if his primary motivation was self-interest. But the rich man in this story doesn't use his money for anyone but himself.

And as Gilbert said last week, there may have been links from that story back to the previous story of the prodigal son, and there are reminders of that story in tonight's too. The prodigal son story ends up with the father saying to the older brother, "This brother of yours was dead, but now he is alive again." And tonight the rich man wants someone who is dead to be made alive again to warn his brothers. So the warnings are contained in all three stories.

Thinking about the Pharisees and their love of money is pretty important to getting our heads around this story as fully as we can. You see it is not just about wealth. In fact, when people have oversimplified this story to say that the poor will go to heaven and the rich are in trouble, they have sometimes used that to justify doing nothing about poverty here and now, because perhaps people are better off in the long run if they are kept poor now. That clearly would not be the teachings of the one who taught us to pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

The really important thing about why this is addressed not just to some people who loved money, but some Pharisees who loved money, is that Jesus really wants to get at a prevalent attitude about the relationship of righteousness to prosperity.

These particular Pharisees were very into both – righteousness and prosperity – and they believed that their prosperity was a consequence of and a proof of their righteousness. You may have heard of prosperity theology – the teaching that if you do what God wants, God will make you conspicuously wealthy.

Well, although most Christians now, and indeed most Jews of Jesus's day would reject that, a more subtle version of it was and is extremely widespread. In fact, most of us hold to it at some level, so we would be seriously deluding ourselves if we identified ourselves with Lazarus in the story and didn't see that we are actually a whole lot more like the rich Pharisees to whom Jesus was directing the story.

You see, at some level, most of us imagine that at least part of the reason why we have enough food to eat and enough clothes to wear and decent houses to live in is because we are good people and we deserve it. And most of us, at least on occasions, when passing a beggar in the street have found ourselves thinking, "That's what you get for doing drugs," or "Why doesn't he get a job?" Because, even though we may fight it and try to think differently, at some level we still think that those who end up on the skids are probably reaping what they have sown, and if they'd just been more responsible like us, they wouldn't have fallen on such hard times.

It is entirely understandable that we would want to hold on to that idea, because it is one of the only ways we can feel that we have any control at all over our destinies. It gives us some

sense of being able to hold the forces of chaos at bay by maintaining our standards. And on its darker side, it is also what enables us to walk right on past Lazarus begging at the gate and look the other way.

The tragedy is that the more we do this, the more entrenched we become in this pattern, and the more entrenched our world becomes in this pattern, and the harder it is to turn it around, and everybody loses. The deep chasm Jesus depicts between the rich man and Lazarus is a chasm that we are digging by our own efforts.

The more we dig ourselves into thinking that not only are we the well off and they the poor, but we are the righteous and they the unrighteous, we are the solution and they the problem, we are the saved and they are the damned, the wider and more unbridgeable we make the chasm between us. And not only does that further entrench poverty and misery as unchangeable in the world, but it increasingly cuts us off from the mercy of God – not because God withholds mercy, but because we have so bought into a system that sees everyone getting what they deserve that we have left no room for mercy. When we expunge grace from our worldview, we condemn ourselves to living in a world without grace. We dig our own unbridgeable chasm.

Perhaps that's why Jesus predicts that even someone rising from the dead will not change anyone's ways. Perhaps resurrection is too easily interpreted in the same terms of success and we can just assimilate it into views of the deserving and the undeserving. There are many fervent Christians who urge us to focus on Christ's resurrection and who avoid contemplating the suffering of Jesus on the cross. And they spend great energy on trying to prove the resurrection as an irrefutable proof that will convert the world.

But Jesus says they won't be convinced even if someone does rise from the dead. And perhaps here we are seeing why. It is only in contemplating the suffering of a perfectly innocent man that we can begin to refill that chasm and dismantle this false assurance that the divisions of success and suffering are deserved and ordered. It is in contemplating God's own entering into the suffering of the world's impoverished and tortured victims that we can finally see that these divisions have got nothing at all to do with God's rewards and punishments. It is in contemplating the tortured demise of one whose name we know and love that we can begin to understand that all who suffer are named and loved brothers and sisters.

Did you notice that Lazarus is named in this story, while the rich man is not? Quite the opposite of the world we live in, isn't it? But when Jesus is stripped of everything and cast out to die, he bids us to stop seeing the poor simply as a nameless mass called "the poor", and to restore to them names and identities and dignity and to stand in solidarity with them as ones who all together stand in need of God's mercy and who have a claim on one another's mercy and compassion.

As we approach the Lord's Table tonight, if you approach confident that you have earned your right to be there by your own righteousness and success, you have missed the point. And if you approach it, imagining that you are more like Lazarus than like the rich Pharisee, you are probably deluding yourself. But if you can approach it, knowing that though you are a well off religious type, you are using what you have to help enable your brother Lazarus to get there, and that you approach together, arm in arm, both equally undeserving, and both equally dependent on the mercy of God, then here at this table, hosted by the crucified one,

you will find the chasm filled in and taste the world made new, and know yourselves risen from the dead.