The Holy Gospel according to Luke 16: 19-31

**19**“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. **20**And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, **21**who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. **22**The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. **23**In Hades, where he was being tormented, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. **24**He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.’ **25**But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus in like manner evil things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. **26**Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ **27**He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— **28**for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ **29**Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ **30**He said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ **31**He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

This is the Gospel of Christ

Please be seated

This issue of material possessions appears and reappears in Luke gospel. In previous Sundays, we have heard about the deceptiveness of wealth in enticing the rich to presume they can ensure a secure future with a potential for one to idolise possessions. Luke has also covered the importance of attending the poor and the importance of giving. This Sunday the climax of Luke’s interest comes in the dramatic story of the rich man and Lazarus.

Why did Luke give so much attention to material possessions? One could suppose that the community in which Luke lived was either predominantly composed of rich people who needed to be reminded of their obligations to the poor, or perhaps was it simply a recognition of a state of tension between the rich and the poor. Who knows, but we can read into this story, great social implications in the Christian message.

At the heart of the message is the great reversal in which these rich and powerful, who in this life perceive no need for a divine grace, are instead cut off from the people of God. Instead, the poor, the lowly and the outcasts are given a proper place in the community of faith. In any Christian community, the promise is that God reverses the social and economic scale in a surprising way, and nowhere is this reversal more vividly put than in the story of the rich man and Lazarus. While there are at least two themes developed in this story, the changed circumstances of the two primary characters dominate the story. Right at the beginning we are faced with a sharp contrast – Rich man, poor man. What is mentioned about the rich man is the signs of his lavish wealth, his well-stocked wardrobe, and his gluttonous diet. Lazarus is depicted in gross terms what we would rather not hear, but the details make him an outcast.

It is only after the death of both characters and their reversed positions in the afterlife that we begin to discover the real problems with the rich man. He was not harshly condemned. He was not indicted because he was rich, as if there were something inherently evil about money. We are not told that he persecuted Lazarus, or deliberately refused him food, or sponsored legislation to rid his gates of beggars.

It was when the rich man died that he saw the beggar for the first time. The difficulty with their relationship on earth was that he just never saw Lazarus. One of the prime dangers of extreme wealth is that it causes blindness. What I mean by that is that the rich man’s wealth had so distorted his vision that he was unable to perceive the beggar at his gate, identify with his predicament and to ease his suffering. Unfortunately, prosperity had a way of limiting the rich person’s perspective,

And so, the reversal occurred. It should have been obvious that the rich man’s position with respect to the beggar was no longer one of superiority, but so flagrant was his presumptuousness that he continued to make demands and attempted to negotiate relief for his suffering, with an attitude that was insulting to both Abraham and Lazarus alike. Quite clearly, his assumption was one of entitlement for himself, and that his brothers should have special treatment with a visit from the dead to help improve their chances after death. In his view, surely such an extravagant request should be granted for a family of such importance as his. If they could only know what lies ahead of them, they could be spared such a fate.

As harsh as it may seem, this gospel lesson has good news for the poor and suffering. Interestingly, death came as a blessing for Lazarus, and as a woe to the rich man. While the angels took Lazarus away to Abraham, the rich man lost his privileges and was dropped in a place of torment. But death does not seem to have taught him a thing. He still thinks he’s in charge and gives instructions through Abraham. Send Lazarus to get me water, send him to my brother’s house.

Though this story deals with the afterlife, it should not be misused as an excuse to do nothing for those who lack justice in this life. God’s promise to remember the poor and suffering in the afterlife should move all to do likewise here and now. It should inspire us to personal acts of compassion, as well as systemic changes to the social conditions that create or perpetuate poverty and suffering. This reading illustrates just how vast the gap can be between the rich and poor, but it also illustrates what little effort and sacrifice it would take for those who have so much. This rich man’s sin was not that he did the wrong things, but simply, that he did nothing.

Doing nothing when there is a clear social need will be difficult to justify when each of us faces Jesus on our day of judgement.

Amen