

Seeing Lazarus

In our passage from Luke's Gospel this morning it's unusual - and rather refreshing – to be told the name of the poor man and not the rich man. We are told that the poor beggar who lies at the rich man's gate is called Lazarus, but the rich man in his mansion is anonymous. He's known by tradition as Dives but that is just an adjective that describes him, meaning 'rich'. It's not a name. And that unusual inversion is indicative of Luke's concern for the poor, and his conviction that in God's Kingdom everything is turned upside down and the first come last and the powerful and the mighty are cast down while the poor and those of no degree are exalted – exactly as happens in this story.

So we know the name of the poor man, Lazarus and I wonder if the rich man knew his name. I wonder if he bothered to find it out. Indeed I wonder how much attention he paid to this sad figure at his gate. Did he speak to him? Did he show compassion? And that's why my attention is drawn particularly to verse 23 of this passage where we read that in Hades, where the rich man was being tormented, 'he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.'

I think you could preach a whole sermon on those two words 'and saw'. 'The rich man looked up and saw Lazarus...' It would not have been the first time that the rich man had seen Lazarus. It would not have been the first time he set his eyes upon him. Lazarus lay at his large wrought-iron gate with its spot-lights and security cameras and its intercom for years and while I am sure the rich man would have done his best to turn his head whenever he passed him in his BMW, and while I'm sure that that rich man's servants would have pushed Lazarus aside just in case he should come into the rich man's field of view, yet nevertheless he would have seen him. How else did he recognise him when the roles were reversed and the rich man pleaded with Abraham to send Lazarus to touch his tongue with water? The rich man had seen Lazarus before alright. But what I can't help wondering is just what he had actually seen. What did the rich man *see* when he looked at Lazarus? Maybe Lazarus was just an eye-sore, something that defaced his fancy front gates and lowered the tone of the neighbourhood. Indeed maybe the rich man saw him as a financial liability – after all Lazaruses often hang around in groups, and I dare say local

house prices were falling because of ‘these people’. Or maybe the rich man saw Lazarus as a work-shy scrounger who ought to get on his bike and find a job. Or maybe when he looked at Lazarus he saw a sad but inevitable victim of the sad but inevitable cuts in public services necessitated by the parlous state of the economy – shame, isn’t it, that the poor always seem to suffer disproportionately. Or maybe when the rich man looked at Lazarus he saw someone who fully deserved to be exactly where he was. That, after all, would have been a common interpretation of beggars in Jesus’ day. I mean, were not wealth and prosperity a sign of God’s blessing and was not the rich man therefore greatly blessed by God? Whereas Lazarus... well, the rather ironic thing about Lazarus is that his name actually means ‘God has helped’ and yet quite clearly God has not helped Lazarus at all. And that can only be because Lazarus has sinned. He is only getting his just deserts.

Well, whatever the rich man saw, he never really saw Lazarus at all. He saw him and yet he didn’t see him and let me explain what I mean. You see, we need to be aware of a little sequence, a pattern that we find in a number of stories in Luke’s Gospel – one that moves from seeing, to having compassion, to acting mercifully, and I’ll give you some examples of where we can discern this progression. If we just go back to the previous chapter we find the story we refer to as the Prodigal Son, about the young man who grabbed his inheritance and ran away from home in search of the good life and ended up broke and destitute. And you recall how he resolved to return to his father. Well, we read that while this young man ‘was still a long way off his father saw him, and his heart went out to him; he ran to meet him, flung his arms around him and kissed him.’ There you have it. Seeing – truly seeing – prompts heartfelt compassion and action. Or again, in an earlier chapter, we read of a distraught woman grieving the death of her only son and we are told that, ‘when the Lord saw her his heart went out to her...’ and then Jesus raises the man from death. Again – seeing, compassion and action go together. Or we could think of that other story in Luke about the man attacked on the road and left for dead. And a priest and a Levite come along and they see him – and yet they don’t really see him at all. They don’t see him with eyes of compassion for they pass by on the other side. And there he lies until a hated Samaritan comes by who sees with his heart, and acts. And elsewhere in the other Gospels we read that Jesus saw the crowds and had compassion - and suddenly the sick are healed and the lame are leaping and the hungry are being filled.

That is seeing for you - seeing with the heart that prompts a response. And in this sense this rich man in our story is blind. He looks at Lazarus and he is unmoved. He does nothing. His vision is impaired, and the question is, how has he become like this? How is it that he cannot view Lazarus with compassion? Maybe it's his wealth that has blinded him. Maybe his riches have hardened his heart. Maybe wealth can do that to us. But how might this rich man be helped so to see? That is a vital question for it's one that addresses us too. Here we are, after all, on this harvest Thanksgiving Sunday when we praise God for the harvest but we know that we do so in a world populated with Lazaruses lying destitute at the gates of excess, and things never seem to change. So how are we to learn to see in such a way that we are moved to respond, that the world may be changed?

Let me take you back to an 18th Century vicar by the name of Robert Malthus, for Robert Malthus had a quite a significant effect on economic theory. Malthus argued that there is always a tendency of the population to increase more rapidly than the food supply. Population grows out of kilter with food production and it is therefore vital to keep the growth of the population in check. Now whatever else poverty does, it shortens life-span, and it therefore restrains population growth, and it is therefore a necessity. So on this understanding Lazarus, lying at the gate with his sores, is paying the price for maintaining an equilibrium between population and available food. And it's no surprise that Malthus' thought influenced Charles Darwin for the basic assumption here is that life is a struggle for survival, a competition for scarce resources. Here we have what we might call an 'economics of scarcity' and while you might say that Malthus's theories are old hat and irrelevant they represent a mind-set which you could argue is the myth and mind-set of our age. It's a mindset that is reinforced by varieties of capitalism which perceive goods as always threatened by scarcity so that we must fight and compete for resources and grab all we can. It's a mindset that is expressed in attitudes to refugees – they're coming to take our jobs and to impoverish us. It's a mindset that assumes that however much we have it is never enough – growth and more growth is always essential. This is the mindset that comes with the economics of scarcity and it is obsessed with control - control of the world economy, control of everyone else's economies.

Now, no-one is arguing that resources are limitless. No-one is arguing against wise and prudent stewardship of resources. But it's about mindset,

about fundamental attitudes. And this Harvest Thanksgiving Sunday invites us as Christians to adopt an alternative mindset. It offers us an entirely different perspective. For in opposition to the economics of scarcity we proclaim a kingdom of abundance and generosity. One theme that resounds throughout the Bible is the astonishing, reckless, lavish, excessive, overflowing generosity of God revealed in creation. Just as a random quote, listen to psalm 65:

You care for the earth and make it fruitful,
you enrich it greatly,
filling its channels with rain...
you crown the year with your good gifts;
places where you have passed drip with plenty;
the open pastures are lush...

... and so on. Here is the extraordinary abundance of creation which is echoed over and over again in Scripture. Here is God's open-handed provision. Here is the God described by Paul in our reading from 1 Timothy as the one who 'richly provides all things for us to enjoy.' You see, the problem of poverty in our world is not a problem of supply. The problem is a myth of scarcity which fuels our competition for the earth's resources – and while we are the winners Lazarus represents the losers.

So how are we to get the rich man to see Lazarus? How are we to get him to truly see him with the heart so that he is moved to compassion and to action? And it's not just the rich man in the story: how are we to begin to see, and to feel, and to act? Well, we can bang on about justice and we do plenty of that. We can plead for a more just ordering of our world and surely we need that. But I want to suggest to you that justice is not enough. The scales of justice by themselves will not wipe the scales from the rich man's unseeing eyes. Alongside a vision of justice must go a vision of generosity, God's generosity of abundance which puts our myth of scarcity to shame. Indeed I would argue that it is generosity more than justice that is a feature of the God of the Bible, and that generosity trumps justice every time. And I want the rich man to go beyond justice with Lazarus and to give him a taste of a God whose generosity stretches justice to bursting point. And that is why what we do today in this Harvest thanksgiving is so important.

What will it take to make the rich man see Lazarus? What will it take to make us see? God grant that here today, reminded as we are of God's crazy

generosity, our eyes will be opened, and then not only our eyes but our hearts and our hands. Amen.

Heavenly Father,

Creator of our amazing Universe.

At this time of Harvest in the Northern Hemisphere we are reminded again of your Glory.

The promises of Spring are in the past, summer is gone and now we have the fruits of your bounty to celebrate the wonder of your creation.

And we Thank you and we praise Your Holy Name

The miracle of your creation seems impossible to take in when we see the sheep and cattle in the pasture, knowing that our clothing and food is produced by animals such as these.

Fed on simple green grass.

Each delicious dish that we produce in our kitchens is transformed from your glorious bounty.

Lord, we thank You for Farmers, Fishermen and imaginative cooks.

Oh, Father, we see such terrible inequality in the world.

People and your amazing nature exploited for profit.

Open the eyes of the Super Rich and people who are out of touch with the Poorest of the Poor.

Father God, protect us from greed and avarice and help us all to share the gifts that You have bestowed upon us.

At this time of Harvest we also think of those who are sad, especially for the family and friends of Harm Wimmenhove, a friend of a member of this church, who was killed in an accident last week.

In a moment of silence we bring before you those who we know are in special need of your loving care.

Lord Thank you for listening to our prayers all prayed in Your Holy Name,
Amen