

Luke 16: 19-31; 1 Timothy 6: 6-19 29.09.19 (Harvest Thanksgiving)

Seeing with gratitude

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 introduced to this poor beggar named Lazarus, who lies at the gates of an anonymous rich man's mansion. The rich man is known by tradition as Dives but that is just an adjective meaning 'rich'. It's not a name. And this unusual inversion is indicative of Luke's concern for the poor, and it echoes the words of Jesus' mother Mary at the beginning of his Gospel that in God's Kingdom 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, but I wonder if the rich man knew his name. I wonder if he bothered to find out. Indeed I wonder how much attention he paid to this sad figure at his gate. Did he speak to him at all? 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. Interesting: 'The rich man looked up and saw Lazarus...' This cannot be the first time that the rich man has seen Lazarus. This cannot be the first time he set his eyes upon him. After all, Lazarus lay at his large wrought-iron gate with its spotlights and security cameras and its intercom for years and while I am sure the rich man would have done his best to turn his face away whenever he passed by in his BMW, and while I'm sure that that rich man's servants would have pushed Lazarus aside just in case he might enter the rich man's view, yet nevertheless he would have seen him alright - though this would be the first time Dives looked *up* to see Lazarus, as we're told: in his former life he would always have looked *down* on him.

What I can't help wondering, however, is just what the rich man had seen when he looked at Lazarus. What did he actually *see*? 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 he saw Lazarus as a black hole, sucking in benefits and housing and

free health care, or he might even have seen Lazarus as a sad but inevitable victim of the recession – shame, isn't it, that the poor always seem to suffer disproportionately in a recession? 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, when Dives' wealth and prosperity would be understood as a sign of God's blessing, 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. 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.' Now, 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 Jesus then 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 – but they don't really see him. 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 clearly it's his wealth

that has blinded him, his riches that have hardened his heart. Wealth can do that to us.

So what will it take to make this rich man see Lazarus? 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 earth's produce but 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 such that we are moved to respond, and the world is changed?

Well, those of you who hear my utterances from this pulpit from week to week may recognise a favourite theme of mine: that the Gospel, salvation, Christian faith involves learning to see the world differently – learning to reimagine the world, to re-read it, to reinterpret it. Christians are people who learn to see differently because our eyes have been washed in the waters of baptism and we learn to view the world as God sees it. And on this Harvest Thanksgiving morning I would suggest to you that if we are going to have any hope of saving the planet – if we are going to have any hope at all of saving our world from the kind of divisions between rich and poor that are pictured in this parable, and if we are going to have any hope of saving it from environmental or nuclear catastrophe, then we need to learn to view the world and life in it as gift: to see it as pure, gracious, generous, undeserved gift.

Now, this is far from obvious. It seems that deep in our DNA we are conditioned to view the world in terms of competition for resources. And it is the genius of great empires, be it the Roman or the Dutch or the British to find ways to compete successfully for the riches of the earth – and that is not surprising when life is driven by evolution and the survival of the fittest. And this competitive view of the world breeds a sense of entitlement – we have a right to an unjust share of the earth's riches: we've earned it, we've won it and this is the natural order of things. So we no longer speak the language of gift. And that affects how we see things - life on earth becomes a fight for supremacy.

But here is the crucial thing: the language of gift only make sense when there is a God. For there to be gift there has to be a giver. I find it fascinating that dear, atheist, Richard Dawkins constantly speaks of gift when he describes evolution. On YouTube you will find a short film called 'The Gift of Life' in which Dawkins ecstatically rhapsodises about 'coming into the world and awakening, awakening in the fullest sense of seeing the universe, seeing the

stars, seeing down a microscope, seeing what's inside very single cell, seeing what's inside the brain, marvelling at this wonderful gift of life...' There you have it: seeing, seeing the glories of nature – and seeing them as gift. But what meaning does gift have if there is no giver?

Along with gift goes gratitude, that fundamental disposition of the heart that is thankful for what we have. And again, Dawkins is full of gratitude: 'When I lie on my back and look up at the Milky Way on a clear night and see the vast distances of space and reflect that these are also vast differences of time as well, when I look at the Grand Canyon and see the strata going down, down, down, through periods of time which the human mind can't comprehend . . . it's a feeling of sort of an abstract gratitude that I am alive to appreciate these wonders... I am grateful to be alive to appreciate these wonders.' Well, I don't know what 'abstract gratitude' means but I suspect it's shorthand for 'gratitude when there is no-one to be grateful to...' and I need convincing that this makes sense.

I doubt that Dives in our story had much gratitude in his heart. When he looks out at his house with its gates and when he looks at himself in the mirror in his purple and finery, I wonder – is he grateful? Or does he just congratulate himself on his success? Just a few chapters previously Jesus has told us about a rich man who might be a model for Dives: a man who had land which produced abundantly – it *gave* abundantly – and the man builds barns and bigger barns only he congratulates himself on having this great store of abundance laid up: and then, suddenly, he dies. The gift of life, the undeserved, unmerited gift of life is taken. But his eyes had never learned to recognise gift.

It all come down to seeing. How do we view life? How do we see the world, creation, nature, abundance: as a free-for-all in which we are entitled to what's ours? Or as gracious, open-handed gift. Today, Harvest Thanksgiving reminds us of gift, and gratitude. What is at stake may be nothing less than the future of the planet. Amen.

O gracious, living God,
another dawn breaks,
another day awakes,
and all creation rises to praise you, its Maker.
And we rise with it,
adding our voices to the silent chorus of praise that extols you:
you by whose hand all is made,
you who ordain the rhythm and rhyme of the seasons,
Spring and Summer, Autumn and Winter,
seedtime and harvest.
And so we come with gladness to worship you,
echoing the joy of creation;
thankful for your generous provision,
for nature's abundance,
grateful that we are well supplied and well fed.
But we come too with sorrow.
For as we bring to you the offerings of the earth
we know ourselves to be destroyers;
we know ourselves to be hoarders,
we know ourselves to be colluders with
the plundering of nature
and the unjust sharing of its resources.
And so we confess our sins and acknowledge our failures...

God, your Word assures us that you loved this world
so much that you sent you Son to redeem it.
You assure us of your grace and forgiveness.
And in that promise we find peace, and we pray together in the words Jesus
taught us, saying...