

Sermon on Sunday 28 September 2025

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Gospel reading: Luke 16. 19-31



Lazarus and the rich man

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus: this is a wonderful passage for an investment banker to preach on!

Christians have always had an uneasy relationship with wealth. We talk it down a lot, but many of us aren't too good at doing without it.

St Paul, writing to his young protégé Timothy in our first reading, warns him not to become preoccupied with the pursuit of earthly prosperity – for it has been a fatal distraction for many believers from the true treasures of the Kingdom of God. Do many of us listen to Paul's advice?

I recall one of those ironic posters you used to see on student bedroom walls: "I know being rich doesn't make you happy, but please give me a chance to prove it for myself."

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is very different in tone from Jesus' other parables.

It's the only one of Jesus' parables where one of the characters has a name, Lazarus. Usually Jesus keeps it very generic: 'a sower; a Samaritan; a certain man; a woman'.

When I approach a parable, I often like to start by asking my congregation a question: Where do you find yourself in this story. Which of the characters in this story can you identify with? Sometimes I ask for a show of hands.

That doesn't work here, because this is such a tale of extremes. One man enjoying unlimited conspicuous wealth (and the operative word is 'enjoying'), he doesn't hold back on gratifying his appetites. And another man living right next to him, though safely on the other side of his gate, in absolute destitution.

They both die, and everything is turned upside down. Lazarus feasts with Abraham in the afterlife, the rich man suffers torturing thirst in Hades. It's a very black-and-white morality tale that lacks all the humour and humanity, and subtle ambiguity, that makes Jesus' other parables so engaging.

Some scholars suggest that this isn't a Jesus original, but that he's borrowed a story from a different Jewish tradition and quietly subverts it.

It is certainly a very dangerous parable. Through history it has been badly misinterpreted in two ways.

The first way: That this is a story about what happens when we die. Another piece of evidence for those who envisage a vindictive God torturing the unrepentant in the flames of hell.

The second way: Also, that this is a story about what happens when we die. But, from this viewpoint, it tells us how it is good for us to endure, or even worse to condone suffering, injustice and cruelty on earth because the rewards in the afterlife will be inversely proportionate to the pain.

Both are profoundly wrong. This is about how Jesus wants us to treat each other now. Telling those who have abundance - whether it is wealth, power, prestige, education - to show generosity, empathy, and kindness to those who have missed out.

The Jewish system of welfare in Jesus' time relied on the simple principle that those who had more than enough should give to those in need who asked for help. You see it working in many New Testament passages. Begging was not a social disgrace. But the rich man fails in his duty. That is the disgrace.

The name Lazarus has a meaning. "The one whom God helps". A gentle reminder of where God's priorities lie.

Actually, the scholars tell us that there's much more in the name. Lazarus is a Latin form of the ancient name Eleizar, who is named in Genesis chapter 15 as Abraham's steward, and heir to all his wealth. When Abraham and Sarah, late in their lives, unexpectedly become parents, Eleizar loses that inheritance, and is left outside the covenant that God makes with Abraham and his descendants. Did you notice the detail in the story, that Lazarus now sits with Abraham? He's not feasting with the King, as you see in Jesus' other parables of the Kingdom. In this parable, the outsider, the beggar, the pleader, is welcomed back into the covenant of grace. The rich man, by his greed and want of compassion, has placed himself outside the covenant of grace he no doubt believes is his by birthright. He has indeed "dis-graced" himself.

And the disinherited inherit the Kingdom.

Where might we now find ourselves in the parable?

Do we need to find the Lazarus in us? The one whom God helps, because as the old prayer of confession has it, there is no help in us?

We can offer to God our wealth, our eloquence, our strength, if we have these things – and God can use all those things in the right place and time. But should we not rather approach our God as one beyond the gate, asking for help. Holding out to Him all our weakness; our thoughtlessness, our inconsistency and

our insecurity, our hesitancy, our greed and our self-regard, and asking him to replace all of these things with the trust, and the love and the joy that we find in his grace.

A grace that will also bless us with generosity and a right judgment of the real values of your Kingdom. So that if we should meet another Lazarus at our gate, we will not merely offer alms, but will open the gate that keeps us apart and embrace them as our namesake – Lazarus, the one whom God has helped.

Father, may I, may we, also be worthy of his name and of his reward. Amen