

Sermon preached by Janet Bunker in the Chapel, Westcott House - 8 March 2007

*When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged Him on a tree,  
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;  
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds and deep,  
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.*

*When Jesus came to Birmingham they simply passed Him by,  
They never hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die,  
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give Him pain,  
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.*

*Still Jesus cried, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do,"  
And still it rained the wintry rain that drenched Him through and through,  
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,  
And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.*

That poem was written by the priest Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, whose death we commemorate today. The poem is called Indifference and it is indifference which is at the heart of the parable we have just heard.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is unique to Luke and comes at the end of a long series of parables, the lost sheep, the lost coin, the Prodigal Son and the Dishonest Manager, all of which Jesus tells in response to criticism by the Pharisees and scribes that he is eating with sinners. Luke 16 begins and ends with parables that start with the phrase 'There was a rich man...' and these stories are aimed at the disciples, the Pharisees and of course, us, as hearers of this parable today. The story of the rich man and Lazarus is the final dramatic point in Luke's critique of wealth and the wealthy, that began earlier in his Gospel with Mary's Magnificat.

I've said that this parable is unique to Luke but it also has two other unique features. Firstly it is the only parable of Jesus that uses a specific name for one of its characters, Lazarus, from the name Eleazar, meaning 'God helps', a foreshadowing of Lazarus' ultimate fate. Secondly, it is the only parable with a transcendent element; Jesus reshapes a well known folk tale by adding on a second part, the heaven and hell section.

And it's the events in heaven and hell that immediately struck me. For a start, there is not a word from Lazarus in the whole story. He remains as silent in death as he has been in life. However the rich man continues to think of Lazarus as someone inferior who he can order about. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his tongue with water and then later asks if Lazarus can act as a messenger to warn his brothers about their possible fate in the afterlife. Interestingly the rich man *knows* Lazarus' name despite the earlier earthly part of the story showing no interaction between the two. I have a mental image of him leaving his house every morning and stepping over the poor man at his gate without a second glance, the poor were part of the city's landscape then just as now. Luke's describes the Pharisees as 'lovers of money' and he saw this love as being rooted in their wanting something back in return for any charity to the poor. They wanted status and deference from those they helped. In Luke's eyes, they had become too much like the Romans, whose society depended entirely on the rich supplying patronage and requiring service from those in their debt. Wealth and how it made people act towards each other was to be the opposite of how those in the Kingdom of God were to be with each other. Kingdom people were to **give** without thought of what they were to **receive** and all were to be treated equally and with respect whatever their circumstances. The rich man even in hell still hasn't realised that Lazarus is no longer to be treated as his inferior.

Abraham then speaks of there being no possibility of Lazarus helping the rich man because '...between you and us a great chasm has been fixed...and no one can cross from there to us'. So the gap between the two men that *could* have been bridged on earth by the rich man is now an uncrossable barrier, the fate of the two men are sealed for ever, Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham, the rich man in torment.

So, is the message of this parable simply one about the consequences of being rich or being poor? There's no indication that the rich man has been condemned just for being rich; Abraham was certainly a wealthy man and he's in heaven. Nor is there any reason given for the poor man to be in heaven except that he is poor, needy and lacking society's respect. I think this story offers another meaning.

Parable in Greek means to lay one thing alongside another. Jesus' audience was to draw parallels from this story and compare it with their own real life situation. Let me tell you the story that came to mind when I put this parable alongside my own experience.

I had worked for a number of years in advice and counselling work so when I became the caseworker for the MP for Cambridge (the last Labour one!), I thought I had seen and heard most human problems. How wrong I was! The problems I had encountered before, mostly with students, were really nothing compared to those that the constituents brought along to the MP's surgery. Real, grinding poverty, overwhelming debt, homelessness, acute family breakdown, immigration problems that meant people not knowing for years whether they were going to be deported and separated from their families. And those with severe mental health issues that left them isolated and desperate. What really came as a shock however was the realization that these people lived in the same city where I had lived for 13 years. I had been completely oblivious of their existence. How could I have missed these people? Had I like, the rich man, been so preoccupied with my life and comfort that I had been blind to these people and just passed them by? How had this gap between people in the same city come about?

The social activist Ann Morisy describes community in the twenty first century, not in terms of neighbourhood but in terms of "flows" and "networks". Thus being middle class, fairly affluent, living in a 'nice' part of the city, having work and a supportive partner and family, meant that the flow of my life and the networks I was part of resulted in me never interacting with the people I was now confronted with.

These separate flows can be seen in some churches where the congregations often do not reflect the neighbourhoods around them. The congregation in my sending parish church for example does not represent the community around it and now struggles to interact with newcomers to the area; they have plenty of bonding as a group but little bridging capital with those outside.

But today's society has become so atomized, so individualized, that I believe churches must act to reconnect communities, must work to heal the gaps between people in this world. That's part of their counter-cultural, kingdom work.

Bishop Edward King, who is also commemorated today, once famously said after a survey of his clergy in the Diocese of Lincoln in the 1900s that, one third of the clergy had gone out of their minds, one third were going out of their minds, and one third had no minds to go out of! Speaking a hundred years later the current Bishop of Lincoln, John Saxbee, reported a much healthier situation in Lincoln today and one I think that gives all those involved in Christian witness in this country, hope. He found clergy and congregations at the cutting edge of community development, prophetic witness and political engagement, they were to be found working in the inner city and deep country when most other professionals had relocated to less demanding environments. They were there because that is where they believe God had called them to be, and they were there to witness to Christ incarnate in the poor man at the gate, as well as the rich man in his castle.

This healing service is not perhaps what you might have been expecting, tonight's worship encourages us, as future leaders of churches, to work for the healing of *communities* in which we will serve, to close the gaps, even the chasms that exist between people today. I'm not naive enough to think that churches can do that alone, there are others of different faiths and of no faith who we must work with to close the gaps. Nor am I underestimating the difficulty of that task today.

'We are living for the sensation of the moment, and it is profoundly unsatisfying. It is like trying to live on fancy cakes ... You cannot live on them... We have in these days a sensational Press, a sensational stage, sensational dress, sensational literature, and sensational everything else, except sensational souls, and the consequence is that our daily lives are as dull as the daily press.'

That analysis of society was written surprisingly in the 1920s by Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, the writer of my opening poem, but it is still applicable to society today. Geoffrey spent part of his ministry with the soldiers in the trenches of the First World War. When he returned to Britain after the war he was profoundly disappointed by the indifference of the rich to the poor he found in that post war society. Jesus warned that we would always have the poor with us, but notice the phrase *with us*. The poor are to be noticed, to be with us, we are called *never* to be indifferent to those in need.

Despite all the rich man had heard in the Jewish scriptures about the poor and how they should be treated, he had simply chosen to ignore them and to live life for his own and his family's satisfaction. The rich man never realized that what he needed was not more possessions or comfort or safety behind his gate, but that *he* needed Lazarus. The rich man was the one in need. By the grace of God, I've been given the opportunity by my curacy in Cambridge to redress my previous indifference by living with and ministering to people who I had only seen before as constituency casework.

I've joked with others here that in their curacies in affluent parts of the country they will have to learn, not to lift up the lowly, but to discomfort the rich. One discomforting fact for the rich is that they need to look at how isolated they are from others. I was amused to read that the clinical psychologist Oliver James has coined the phrase 'Affluenza'. This term describes the result of placing a high value on acquiring money and possessions, looking good in the eyes of others and wanting to be famous. Affluenza is said to increase your susceptibility to mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety and results in consumer debt, overwork, waste, and harm to the environment, it's an affliction of the developed world. But people find that despite all they have materially, they still have a need to be connected to others, to feel part of a community. Ann Morisy says that people become involved in social action because they want story rich lives, something they can't buy. They are drawn to churches which can provide them with community connections and rich story.

As Christians we need to tell our stories of Christ and his kingdom, to an increasingly story hungry world. We need to show by our lives and actions that we take seriously the promise of the kingdom that we share in tonight's Eucharist - that all are one in the Body of Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, rich or poor, all of us are one, healed and whole in Christ Jesus.

That's where our true offering of healing to a broken and divided world begins and where we try to live out the difficult message of this parable, to live and to help others live as kingdom people.

*Amen*