

Unpacking the Lazarus Riddle

An approach in preaching this gospel would be to open out some of the details of the parable; one could open by telling a modern story of such a change of fortune. Cinderella is a common fairy tale that has the same basic plot. She is poor and oppressed, but her state is changed by her fairy godmother and then she is enthroned as the Princess. Jesus used such a story to get home his message. Then the story could be expanded upon, bringing some details that the 21st century listener might not notice. The beggar's name gives us a hint as to his inner attitude. He is called Lazarus, or Eliezer, God will help. The beggar is the man who puts his trust in the Lord and longs for him. The rich man is nameless. He is everyone who closes his heart in the face of the human misery that comforts us daily. The rich man has sumptuous food and is clothed in unusually elaborate garments. But his guilt is not mentioned. He did not refuse the poor man anything. He just ignored him. The poor man longed to be filled, but his desire was not fulfilled. The bread that fell was the bread that the guests of the wealthy man used to wipe their fingers clean. It was not even being served to them to be consumed.

Lazarus goes to heaven and basks in the company of Abraham, to whom God's brightest promises were made. The poor wretch, whose poverty on earth was misinterpreted as punishment for his sins, is welcomed by the angels of God. The rich man descends into the darkness and emptiness of the grave. The sermon could focus on the ultimate settling of accounts, to level off all social injustices. It could stress the need to be aware of the poor on our own doorsteps, who are lacking of the necessities for a decent life? The rich man did not really deny the existence of Lazarus, he just ignored it, or felt it was in the normal scheme of things. In the richer countries, kept aware by the media of their domestic economic problems, there can be an ostrich mentality that ignores the dire needs of the outside world. The promise of life after death should not be used as an anaesthetic to dull the need to work for justice in the real world.

Another option is to start with the state of the rich man in Hades. He has fallen from his real privileged position as a son of Abraham. The rich man did not really listen to the message of the prophets. Abraham says that the five brothers will not be able to change their way of life if they do not do so through listening to God's word. The sermon could tackle the falseness of ethereal devotions that stress the extraordinary but ignore the social implications of the real gospel. The circumstances of each community will be important in how this gospel of justice in faith is to be preached.

With Empty Hands

The parable of "Mr. Rich and Mr. Poor" is a warning for prosperous people in our prosperous countries. Indifference to the needs of the poor is against the gospel. The gospel contrasts the two attitudes, that of Lazarus, the image of the poor, the downtrodden, those left penniless by the greed of the wealthy and the tax-collectors, and whose only hope was in the mercy of God, and on the other hand that of the rich man, clothed extravagantly, and feasting magnificently every day, self-sufficient, not seeing any need whatsoever to beg for God's mercy.

Help is at hand for the poor, who for a short while share in Christ's sufferings so as to share in his glory. For as St Paul tells us, "What we suffer in this life can't be compared to the glory which is awaiting us." But for anyone who *stores up treasure* in this world instead of becoming rich in the sight of God, death brings the realisation that his life was wasted, that his spirit wants to be possessed by God, but cannot do so because it has become fixed in its ways. As a man lives, so shall he die.

How should we set about ensuring that we are on the way to heaven? Firstly, desire it above all else. "There is one thing I ask of the Lord; for this I long; to dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life" (Ps 26). Secondly, to try to bear life's crosses with patience and faith. Thirdly, to use this world without becoming engrossed in it, as St Paul says, "because the world as we know it is passing away." (1 Cor 7:31). Take each day as a gift and try to live it well. The closer we live to God in our daily lives the more intense will be our longing to see him face to face. With the Psalmist we will find ourselves saying, "my soul thirsts for God, the God of my life. When can I enter and see the face of God" (Ps 42).