

BACKGROUND – 25 September 2016

(Reading: Luke 16:19-31)

Our reading this morning is quite difficult, in the sense that we can easily interpret it with our own modern minds and then miss the message completely. We can easily interpret this passage as saying that rich people go to hell and that poor people go to heaven! But that is **not** what it means at all!

So what does it mean then? Let us take a look at the original context in order to put this story of Jesus into perspective.

The context of the Gospel of Luke is depicting a society that was strictly organised and regulated. Everyone had a role to play in that society. In that society there were two groups, the patrons, those who had a lot and the clients who didn't have anything. Every single person knew their place and dressed and acted accordingly, for example the "purple dress" of the rich man in our story. A purple dress could also indicate a person from royal descent. But although he was most definitely very rich, he has no name in our story while the beggar who has nothing, at least has a name, Lazarus.

There is also a clearly indicated boundary between them, namely, the gate that divides them. While the rich man was mostly in his house, the beggar lay outside at his gate.

And then, when the beggar died, the "angels carried him into Abrahams bosom". He had no proper burial.

Soon after, the rich man died as well and he had a proper burial. But he found himself in "Hades" the place of darkness and death, without the comfort of Abraham, all alone, WITHOUT A PLACE OF HONOUR.

The first Jewish readers would have been shocked with the unfolding of events. According to them the rich man did nothing wrong. He did obey all the rules of his society, namely, to be a Patron and not the friend of the poor, and to act accordingly which he did. The rich man is condemned without evidence of obvious wrongdoing. His sin is only implied, namely, that he does not establish a relationship with Lazarus and walk through the gate to rescue him. And there is no chance of atonement given to

him. The first Jewish readers would have felt that his punishment was a bit harsh!

While, on the other hand, they would have judged the poor beggar more harshly. Why?

Well, everyone had a place in society - even the beggars who would receive gifts from the patrons. But in our story the beggar just lies passively in front of the rich man's gate without lifting a finger to get the attention of his patron. The beggar seems to be passive all through the story, even when he is with Abraham. And a second thing which they would have seen as scandalous was the fact that he was not properly buried. In that society there was nothing worse than not having a proper burial!

But the story gets even more intriguing. When the rich man asks the patriarch of the Jewish nation, Abraham, to send Lazarus over to cool his tongue, he maintains the stance that the boundaries are fixed and that no-one can cross them. And then when the rich man asks that Lazarus go to his brothers to warn them, Father Abraham says that they have sufficient resources to tell them how they should live, namely, the law of Moses and the prophets. The Gospel of Luke refers to the fact that there are several references in the Law of Moses and through the words of the prophets to love the neighbour and care for the poor.

So what is the story all about? It is not about rich or poor. It is about crossing boundaries while you can. It is about reaching out to other people in solidarity and love. It is about inclusive love and breaking down all barriers that exists between people. Jesus is warning his listeners that there is only one opportunity to make amends, and this is when you are alive.

The rich man did only one thing wrong. He did not cross the boundary that existed between him and the beggar or, in plain English, he did not open the gate that separated him from the beggar. And even in death, he asked Abraham if the beggar could come to him and not the other way around. So even in death, he did not practise inclusive love.

Amen

SERMON

The verse I am going to focus on this morning is verse 26: “And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us that would come from thence.”

We are very good in erecting walls, gates and fences around us. We often think that if we do this, we will be able to survive better, and be safer on our own. But we are not very good when it comes to breaking down barriers, walls and fences.

I will never forget the night I watched the breaking down of the Berlin wall in 1989 that divided a continent, Europe, a country, Germany, a city, families, culture and politics for nearly three decades. To see how people reached out to one another was heartbreakingly beautiful. To hear them singing and celebrating holding hands as if they were never separated – brought tears to my eyes. I am sure you will all remember this remarkable part of our modern day history. If you don't, go and watch it on “You tube”. Something that was unimaginable just happened....

But it seems as if these walls exist all around us, even here in our own country, in our own villages and in our own families. We also do it on a daily basis. We discriminate against people who are different from us, even before we think about it.

A parishioner once told me how she will never forget the way she and her family were treated in a village kirk because of their social class. As miners they were poor and people in that Church would look down on their clothes, which made them feel unwelcome. This explains why so many people all over Scotland do not feel worthy enough to become members of the Church or even to partake in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. To many, the doors of the Kirk are a deeply divided wall of separation, gender and class.

But the Lord God is telling us this morning to stop erecting walls or barriers around us. If we are followers of Jesus, you and I must go out and break down each and every wall, barrier, or gate that separates us from other people. You and I must stand up from our comfortable “pews” in the church and reach out to everyone in our community, big and small.

And we must ask the Lord God to help us to always welcome all people who come through these doors. We must actively make them feel genuinely welcome - not like we are doing them a favour, but as an obligation as a follower of Jesus Christ. Yes, you and I must open the doors of our Churches and actively go into the streets, taking the hands of those who needs the salvation and hope of our Lord and Saviour. It is the duty of every believer and follower of Jesus to welcome those who might have seen the Church door as a barrier into our midst.

So let us then listen to the words of the Gospel urging us to go through the gates and bridge the gaps that we so easily create - before it is too late, like it was for the man dressed in purple in the parable. And if you are sitting in the Church and you wonder about your own position, remember **YOU ARE WELCOME IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD!**

Amen