

SERMON: Sunday – 25 September 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Bridging the Great Divide

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

From a young age I remember the story of the rich man and Lazarus. I had this enduring early image of a poor beggar covered in sores which were being licked by the dogs. And my blood used to boil at the injustice of that whilst the rich man looked on, or more likely, paid no attention.

God's word leaves its mark on us with images that sear into the conscience. The Spirit fires up the pilot light of our hearts and sets us aflame with the sense of justice seeking that is God.

It's only right, isn't it, that Lazarus gets his reward in the end? Not an award in that sense but more that wrongs were made right in the end. And it appeals to our sense of justice that the rich man ends up in torment. But this is a story and not a theological treatise of the end times. It's not an explanation of eternal punishment for the rich that some have made it out to be. And perhaps that's just as well. For who decides who is rich and who is poor? Only God of course but this isn't teaching that God will punish some eternally and only save some.

Perhaps in the cost of living crisis we will see more people experience real poverty whilst others appear to be shielded from it by their (our) wealth.

The rich man begs for mercy for his family; warning them to change their ways so that they might not end up where he ended up (in the story). To which he is told that they have Moses and the Prophets to speak to them. That should be enough. The Law and the Prophets. The Scriptures. The Bible. The Word of God, with its appeal to love and justice.

When asked to sum up the Law and the Prophets Jesus does so of course by saying it's all to do with loving God and loving your neighbour as yourself. And if your neighbour is a poor beggar then Love will show you what to do. And justice will be your prompter.

Dorothy Day wrote that Love is the only solution. She said this in her 1948 book, *On Pilgrimage*:

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"When you love people, you see all the good in them, all the Christ in them. God sees Christ, His Son, in us and loves us. And so we should see Christ in

others, and nothing else, and love them. There can never be enough of it. There can never be enough thinking about it. St. John of the Cross said that where there was no love, put love and you would take out love". (Dorothy Day, On Pilgrimage (New York: Catholic Worker Books, 1948)

Where there is no love, put love. Now there's a prompting for the days ahead. How can we put love where there is none? And how can we pursue justice when wrong things are happening here in our own communities as well as on the streets of Tehran or in the towns of Ukraine.

I remember as a boy my dad saying that if you did a good thing you were not to look for payment but rather expect a reward in heaven. I didn't think much of that idea then. "You'll get your reward in heaven". I didn't want to wait that long. I'd have rather had it then. Which of course I did have. I just never saw it then.

I was too busy thinking of what I could've spent my reward on rather than be thankful for being in a position to do something good in the first place. That should have been reward enough.

Paul tells Timothy,
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Command (the rich) to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

Good deeds leading to a taking hold of the life that is truly life. In other words there is a reward for leading a good life - in the satisfaction that comes from knowing one is truly alive; and in the peace that stems from that.

A peace that is learning to be content with what one has and with what little one is able to do in the face of enormous global challenges. And giving thanks for it even.

Its a peace that guards one from being ground down in the face of adversity by thinking they'll never have enough or do enough by being content with. "Well I have something; and I did what I could". And leave it at that. Love and Justice will complete the job.

As Paul advises Timothy,
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godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin

and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

The world doesn't want us to be content with what we have. Planned obsolescence means that some goods are deliberately designed not to last so that the user is forced into having to replace or upgrade to a new product. Anyone with a smart phone will know all about that. Not so smart when they become obsolete.

Advertising tries to pressure people into unnecessary purchases with the promise that somehow this new product will improve your life. Only for them to tell us that we need an upgrade shortly after. It turns out that any improvement is short lived and not the life improvement that is the true life which we all seek.

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Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full".

(John 10:10)

In God we find life which satisfies. In loving God and loving neighbour we discover that contentment which is beyond our full understanding and which is life affirming and life giving.

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"flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.....put (your) hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

(1 Timothy 6:11 and 17b)]

God calls us to flee from the love of money, and instead pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. These are the things to seek.

And to put our hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

We sang of the cry for justice earlier in the words written by John Bell and Graham Maule,

(SLIDE)

How long must some folk suffer?

Where are the fruits of justice?

When will the wrongs be righted?

When will the kingdom come?

When will the world be generous to all instead of some?

To which God answers, who will go for me, who will extend my reach, who when few dare follow will walk the road I show?

The Saviour without safety. The tradesman without tools. Has come to tip the balance. With fisherman and fools.

There may be a great divide between the rich and poor, between the faithful and the faithless, but the revolution to address such inequality has begun and we are called to narrow the gap and extend the reach in whatever ways we can and to know at all times that there is a wideness in God's mercy. And we'll sing a hymn with that title in a moment.

Because the gap, the divide is not just an economic one between rich and poor but is also a spiritual one between those who are rich in faith and those who are impoverished in faith.

Yes we're called to right economic wrongs but also to put love where there is none, to use Dorothy Day's words. Whatever missional ministry we are involved in, like Reuse and Thrive or the Warm Hub Idea or CAP or the Food Bank or The Vine trust or Christian Aid or whatever, there will likely be both an economic and a spiritual dimension. Because whenever people try to help people, relationships form and conversations happen and prayers are better informed and ministry and mission happens organically and with not too much effort.

Let us pray and do all we can to help God right wrongs and bridge divides. Let us pray ..

God of love and justice. You are both of these and in you we are called to live and move and have our being.

Thank you that you are the God who rights wrongs and bridges division. Show us where to put love so that your reach might extend to all and your kingdom of love and justice be all in all in KNEC and beyond.

In Jesus name. Amen.