

Sermon for 25.9.16

Today's parable about the rich man and Lazarus, is the last one in a collection of example stories that are interconnected and overall relate to the way of Christian management of personal material wealth.

Today's parable actually picks up from last week's parable about the unjust steward and conveys a lesson which supplements the moral of that parable.

As we remember in last week's parable, the steward made provision for his future by stealing from his master and escaped the penalties of his dismissal; in today's parable the rich man, who has made no provision for the afterlife does not escape misery after death.

The rich man's opportunity in life was to share his wealth with the less fortunate and Lazarus represents the less fortunate.

His wealth then would have been turned into heavenly capital, and the less fortunate would have repaid him by welcoming him into their eternal home.

Alas during his earthly life, the rich man failed to see Lazarus; he chose to see less than the full reality of Lazarus's humanity.

In a literal sense, he undoubtedly noticed Lazarus, seeing him as an object, an obstruction at his gate. But whilst he was busy with himself with fine purple linens and fine dining, did he really see him as a person, as a brother?

The end of the parable, however, turns the status of Lazarus and the rich man all around. It is Lazarus who is given the dignity of a name, and the rich man is forced into anonymity.

In the second part of today's story the rich man asks in vain for a special revelation to his five brothers, that they may avoid his fate; he is told that if they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, a miracle is not likely to help them.

His opportunity to take the path of salvation for himself and for his brothers had passed.

The story of the rich man and Lazarus is understood by many as an adaptation of a popular folk-tale, perhaps originating in Egypt.

Jesus was not the first to use this story to tell of how wealth and poverty might be reversed in the future life, however he did change the pattern that people expected.

For example, the ending in the parable was different, for in the common folk-tale, when people asked for a messenger to be sent back to warn living relatives to change their ways, permission was granted.

In Jesus story it isn't granted.

The ending rather speaks about God's eternal provision in Jesus Christ that has been given, and the story points beyond itself to all sorts of questions that Jesus 'hearers, and Luke's readers are urged to face.

The gospel of Luke has proportionally more material than the other Gospels dealing with stories about the rich and the poor, and wealth and poverty.

Luke is also particularly fond of giving examples of almsgiving, which always comes in handy for parish priests when preaching about giving generously - and for which I am eternally grateful.

What the gospel of Luke brings into focus is the way of division that is a consequence of the imbalance of wealth, which in turn produces the haves and the have nots.

The chasm between the two is not just about material wealth itself, but more importantly about the power that wealth can acquire and manipulate for self-gain, and the disempowerment of have nots who are unable to change their situation.

Jesus in Luke's gospel is concerned with anything that diminishes one's humanity and the absence of equity can do this.

Last Friday night at All Saints we heard a wonderful presentation by our friend who has recently returned from a tour of duty in Iraq, about the situation in Iraq.

We were presented with a step by step account which, I believe, enlightened all who attended, about the complex religious culture in this ancient land and the involvement of foreign forces and the struggles that they face.

One point that stuck in my mind was a comment about how for the Iraqi leaders, status, that is, how one is seen by others, often, when making decisions, takes precedence over all else, including the common good.

For example we heard the story of the officer in charge of a warehouse that was filled with a broad spectrum of medical supplies.

The officer wanted to keep it filled instead of distributing the items that would assist their soldiers in the field, because a filled warehouse gave him an elevated status among the people. An empty warehouse would not do this.

Perhaps such a talk that we were treated to last Friday night, can stir up many thoughts and ideas in us.

One that stirred in me was about our status, as followers of Christ.

As I understand the determining factor for an elevated status, it is not about how we are seen by others, but rather about who we are in Christ.

Such an understanding may cause us to reflect upon questions like; Are we people who prayerfully live in love with Christ, ourselves and each other.

Are we people who receive the forgiveness won for us, and who seek personal transformation?

Are we people who share our material wealth, who give with a generous heart?

Are we people who reach out to the disempowered members in our society?

Are we people who seek to bridge the gap, in the power of love?

The good news of the gospel is about living in the freedom of Christ. Freedom that speaks not about division but about unity and the fullness of humanity for ourselves and for our neighbour.

The good news of the gospel is about living in the reality of who we are in Christ in thanksgiving, humility, fairness, generosity and love.

May this be the determining factor in our status as the body of Christ in the world.

The Lord be with you.