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Luke 16, 19-31: the Rich Man and Lazarus.

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table.

The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

If you are faced by a Bible text that you don't understand, the obvious thing to do is to ask a theologian to explain it. But if you have to deal with a text that is very familiar to you and on first sight appears to be plain sailing, it may be a good thing to discuss it with someone who is not a theologian; there is a good chance that they will ask the questions that hadn't occurred to you. Some weeks ago I told my wife that the Gospel for this week was the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, and I began to tell her the story. Yes, I said, and then the poor man died and went to Heaven. "Why?" she asked.

Why indeed? He was poor, and he suffered greatly in this life, he received, the story says, bad things. Now he is comforted. It seems to be as simple as that.

The fact that Jesus himself tells such a story challenges many of what appear to be the assumptions of modern popular Protestant theology. There is a general assumption in the air that Hell has been abolished; that hellfire, like Purgatory, was an invention of the Middle Ages or the Dark Ages, intended to keep people in line by frightening them, and that in our modern enlightened days we can only possibly believe in a God who forgives all of us all our sins. I was once present at an event at which, although it was not actually a church service, a priest gave what was practically a sermon on the song "Alle Menschen kommen in den Himmel", as if it were a Biblical text; and I have also heard a Catholic theologian declare: "Church dogma requires me to believe that there is a Hell; it does not require me to believe that there is anybody there." Now a Biblical case can certainly be made for such argumentation; we need look no further than today's epistle reading: "*God is love; there is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.*" But I think we might be wise not to overlook the fact that we cannot build a one-sided doctrine in this respect without somehow getting round some other, less comforting Biblical passages, and ones which cannot be dismissed as being Old Testament and therefore superseded by our redemption through Jesus Christ, but which stem from Our Lord himself. It was he, after all, who not only told the story we are considering this morning, but also gave us the phrase "There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

If I were Martin Luther, I might well at this point start to consider justification by faith. However, we have no evidence from the story that Lazarus had a particularly strong faith; nor indeed can we safely claim that the rich man was lacking in belief. His problem was not that he didn't believe in Moses and the prophets, but that he failed to translate whatever belief he may have had into charitable action – a kind of damnation by works, as it were; or rather, damnation by lack of works; the rich man is, after all, in no way shown to be a particularly wicked man. All he does is – nothing. He does not love the brother he has seen; how can he love God, whom he has not seen?

Our story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is also the subject of an apparently very ancient English ballad under the title Dives and Lazarus. Dives is the Anglicised pronunciation of the Latin word *dives*, rich, used as if it were the name of the rich man who is actually nameless in Jesus' story. As one would expect, the ballad version embroiders the Biblical story with imaginative detail. In this version, Dives sends his servants out with whips to whip Lazarus away from his door, and sends out his dogs to bite him – instead of which they lick his sores to heal them. Thus the ballad gives us a really satisfyingly wicked rich man; one we can be really indignant about. Of course he deserves to go to Hell. None of us would do such things to a poor beggar, would we? How conveniently this distracts our attention from the fact that in the Bible story, the rich man does none of these things. All he does is what any of us might do, what all of us do every day. Nothing.

Whereas he could, of course, have done plenty. As in the parable of the Talents, from him to whom much is given, much is expected. Lazarus, on the other hand, had been given little or nothing, and so he receives his reward without anything being expected of him.

At this point I shall be a coward. I do not intend to pursue the question of the reality of hell-fire any further. I am not Martin Luther; I am not even a theologian, and I am afraid I would get myself into too deep water if I did so. I am in no position to discuss whether this story could possibly be *ipsissima verba*, the very words of Jesus, that is to say the likelihood of our Lord really having told this story in this way. In some ways it reminds us rather uncomfortably of trivial jokes of the kind that begin "A man died and came to St. Peter..." Relatively few begin "A man died and found himself in Hell," perhaps indicating that even today we have an instinctive feeling that Hell is no laughing matter. But I do know one "Hell" joke that I would like to share with you, not just for light relief, but because, I promise you, it is relevant to what I want to say.

A bishop had three sons. Two were good boys and had followed in their father's footsteps: the eldest was already an archdeacon and the second a vicar. The third son was the black sheep of the family and had become a lawyer. One morning, the Bishop had come downstairs first and was standing in front of the fire when the Archdeacon came down. "Good morning, my son; I hope you slept well?" "Thank you father, I slept very well, I dreamt of Heaven." "And what was Heaven like, my son?" "Just like home, father." "Good boy, come and stand by the fire with me." After a short while the vicar came down. "Good morning, my son; I hope you slept well?" "Thank you father, I slept very well, I dreamt of Heaven." "And what was Heaven like, my son?" "Just like home, father." "Good boy, come and stand by the fire with me." Quite a long time later, the lawyer came down. "Good morning, my son." "Hi dad!" "Did you have a good night?" "No, I had a dreadful night; dreamt of Hell." "Really, and what was Hell like?" "Just like home; you couldn't get near the fire for damned clergymen."

Heaven – and Hell: just like home. That may at first seem to contradict the parable, where Abraham points out not the similarity but the contrast: "In your lifetime you received good things, while Lazarus received bad things; but now he is comforted and you are in agony." True; but if you look at it in another way, Heaven and Hell are remarkably like home. Every time the rich man left his house, he passed by Lazarus lying at his gate. Lazarus is no stranger to him. In the ballad I mentioned, he even calls him "Brother Lazarus" – truly a brother he has seen but does not love. And scarcely has he arrived in Hell, than he looks up and sees who? - Lazarus. He recognises him immediately. Indeed, perhaps this is the first time that he has *really* seen him; and he does so because for the first time he finds himself in need, and Lazarus perhaps able to help. And although he is far away, he appears within reach. But here

Abraham has to put him right: “Between us and you a great chasm has been fixed.” He might have added: “Did you never notice it before? Lazarus lay at your gate and you passed right by him every day: yet between you there was always a great chasm. And it was you who fixed it. It’s just like home.”

Not all rich people in Jesus’ stories act in this way. Remember the man who arranged a feast for his friends, and when they all made excuses and didn’t come, he sent out into the highways and byways to bring in the poor and the handicapped. This man was not in the business of chasm-digging, but rather in the business of bridge-building. But although the stories are more dramatic when told in terms of rich and poor, there is no reason why they should be restricted to that dichotomy. You don’t need to be rich either to dig chasms or to build bridges. It’s not really a matter of rich and poor, but rather the question: how much notice do we take of our fellow-creatures? Are we aware of what is going on around us? Do we see those who are sitting at our gates? Do we perceive the needs of others – the material needs, but also the emotional needs, of those who cross our paths in this life? Or are we too busy with our own affairs to even notice the chasms we are digging all around us? The time to develop such awareness, as the story makes clear, is now. Later will be too late; although that does not necessarily mean after death. “If only I had known” is a lament that tells of chasms between us and our neighbours. Suddenly, within the family, we find that a marriage has broken down: were we simply too busy to notice that it was heading for the rocks? Only last week we were shocked by a suicide amongst our wider acquaintance: shouldn’t we have noticed that something was wrong? All too often we build our own Hells here on earth, and all too often we do it by doing - nothing.

Despite all this, however, I have the feeling that these questions of justification by faith or by works, or of whether we, who trust in our redemption through Jesus Christ, should nevertheless still keep in mind a healthy fear of hell-fire, are not really the point of this story, but rather that everything I have talked about so far is only intended to set the scene for the real point that comes at the end.

‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced, even if someone rises from the dead.’

This is reminiscent of the meeting with the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus with the question, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”, apparently expecting something new and amazing as an answer. But Jesus does not offer him anything new and amazing, but answers “You know the commandments” – which is just like Abraham saying “They have Moses”. Even Jesus’ second answer, “Sell what you have and distribute to the poor”, corresponds to Abraham’s “They have the prophets”, for what should the rich man’s brothers learn from the prophets, if not the exercise of mercy and justice towards those less fortunate than themselves? The motto of the Kirchentag in 1995 was “Es ist Dir gesagt, Mensch, was gut ist”, a quotation from the prophet Micah: “He has shown you, O Man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness?”

The punch line, that those who do not listen to Moses and the Prophets will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead, clearly refers to Jesus himself, and one can only say: so it turned out. If we were to reinvent this story today, two thousand years later, then I suppose we would have to say, “...even if someone else also rises from the dead.” There is much talk of the need for renewal in the church. Maybe there is a need for new hymns or new forms of worship, although I myself am rather impatient with young people who, when they come back

from a weekend away with their confirmation class, remark approvingly “We didn’t sing any eighteenth-century hymns,” as if they think we older members of the congregation like eighteenth-century hymns because we grew up in the eighteenth century ourselves. Be that as it may, what we are not in need of is any new revelation. He has shown you, O Man.

In the 2,000 years since Jesus rose from the dead, the world has not noticeably become a much better place. Personally, I do not believe it has become much worse either. It does seem to be the case that the human race has a short memory. In the year 2000 the BBC asked listeners to say who they thought were the greatest Britons of all time; predictably they chose Winston Churchill and Princess Diana. It is equally predictable that if the same question is asked in a hundred years’ time, neither Churchill nor Di will still be, as they say, on the radar screen. Each time the world suffers a new disaster, whether natural or man-made, the debate about to how God can permit such things to occur, or whether there can be a God if such things occur, is conducted as if it were the first time such a thing had occurred; whereas if we really could remember the eighteenth century, we would remember the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, the great disaster of its day that is said to have shaken the comfortable optimism of the Enlightenment.

Faith is the antidote to this shortage of memory, which is no doubt one reason why Christ taught us to “do this in remembrance of me”. However often disaster and misfortune have seemed to challenge the concept, human experience of the existence and love of God throughout the centuries has stood up to the challenge. And it has done so without any divine spectacular repeated at regular intervals, without the need, as Bernard Shaw put it, for a Christ to perish in every age to save those who have no imagination.

We have Moses and the prophets; we even have one who rose from the dead. Let us listen to them.