

A message from beyond - Luke 16:19-31

Are you a bit disturbed by this morning's reading from Luke's gospel? A vision of an afterlife in which poor, sick and suffering Lazarus is carried off by angels to sit a great feast in heaven, while the unnamed rich man is buried in the ground and cast down to Hades – the world of the dead – where he is in great pain in the fire. And not only is the rich man tormented by the flames of hell, he gets to look up and see – and recognise Abraham and Lazarus far off in heaven.

But the story of the rich man and Lazarus is a parable, and just like the other parables that Jesus told, the parables of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son and all the rest of them, it is not an historical story, so it's not true in the sense of being factual, but the story reveals great truth.

And just like the other parables, this one contains surprise – a twist, a shock ending – for Jesus' listeners. And as I've said before, we often miss the significance of such things because we become so familiar with the stories, comfortable with them and confident that we 'get' their meaning. Or we get distracted by the detail – which is I think what can easily happen with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

Despite what many people think Christianity is about – getting a ticket to heaven – there's not a lot in our scriptures about what the afterlife is like.

But Jesus doesn't tell parables in order to tell his listeners about what happens in the afterlife, he tells them in order to tell them about this life. About what's important in this life.

Because what the future holds for us, what God has prepared for us, is really beyond our understanding. St Paul writes to the Corinthians, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9)

In this parable that Jesus tells his disciples, the selfish rich man ends up in Hades, the poor man ends up in heaven. We aren't given any details of their relationship with God, or indeed their actions. Jesus just tells us who they are, and he contrasts their situations in life: Rich man. Expensive clothes. Lived in luxury every day. Poor man. Covered in sores. Carried to the rich man's house in the hope of table scraps. Doesn't even have the strength to shoo off stray dogs.

But that's just the setup, to get the two characters into place for the story.

Lazarus is carried to heaven and sits beside Abraham at the feast. His situation couldn't be more different than his earthly life. Gone is his suffering, gone is his hunger.

By contrast, the rich man is in Hades, in pain, in fire. His life of luxury has been replaced by an afterlife of pain and anguish.

And he calls out across the gulf to Abraham – "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire!" (16:24)

He's a rich man. He's used to living in luxury. By implication, he's used to getting his way and getting others to do what he wants. He doesn't simply ask for relief, but he effectively tells Abraham what he should do 'send Lazarus to help me'.

It's odd, perhaps, that he knows Lazarus' name. I think that for this rich man to know this poor suffering man who was outside his door well enough to know his name, and do nothing about that man's situation – his suffering – really condemns him.

Abraham though, rejects the man's plea: 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.'

Now I don't think Jesus is saying that luxury in this life necessarily leads to suffering in the next, nor that suffering in this life leads to paradise in the next. Abraham is speaking very specifically about these two characters, so we shouldn't take it as a blanket statement.

Although, I think there is a general warning here: If we are totally consumed with luxury and our wealth, then we don't have time for God. As I've said before, money is useful stuff. But we have many warnings in scripture about the dangers of becoming preoccupied with wealth. The love of money is the root of all evil (1 Tim 6:10) and it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Matt 19:24). And so on. We need to be careful. If we are ignoring the suffering man on the doorstep, because we're so occupied with our expensive clothes and living with luxury, then we have a problem.

People often say charity begins at home. But it certainly doesn't stop at our front door.

And then Abraham tells the man about the finality of what has happened. "And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to there cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us."

Too late. You've made your bed, and now you have to lie in it. There's nothing you can do.

So the rich man's mind turns to his family: The rich man said, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' (16:27-28).

It's too late for the rich man, but it might not be too late for his brothers! Send Lazarus to warn them (again – send Lazarus). His brothers could be saved from the same fate as the rich man, but, you know, they'll need some convincing.

But Abraham tells him that, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them.' (16:29)

What they need to hear, says Abraham, they've already heard. But have they listened? It would seem that this man's brothers enjoy the same things in life as this man; they are respectable Jewish men, so they would have been going to the synagogue and listening to the scriptures being read and listening to the teachers all their lives.

If the rich man of this parable hadn't responded to those messages, then maybe – even probably – his brothers wouldn't respond either.

The rich man knows this, 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' (16:30)

Just knowing the scriptures is not enough for them. They need more convincing. They need more proof. They need evidence.

And then we get to the punch line of the story. The point of the parable: “[Abraham] 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.’” (16:31)

Even if someone were to rise from the dead, they won’t be convinced.

Not long after Jesus told this parable he was put to death, and he did rise again. And you know what? People weren’t convinced – many people were, of course, but many, many weren’t.

We read in the New Testament of hundreds of witnesses to the risen Jesus. But still, so many rejected the idea that Jesus had risen. I’m sure you will have heard the alternative explanations:

He wasn’t really dead.

His body was stolen.

It wasn’t Jesus who was crucified, but someone else.

It was a mass hallucination.

And so on.

And yet here I am. Here we all are, as followers of the risen Christ, 2000 odd years later. And we still proclaim this message. This message which so much of the world rejects.

Sometimes it’s speculated that the message isn’t a message that’s suitable for modern times, that we need to adjust what we believe to make it more acceptable to contemporary society.

But the message of Christ wasn’t suitable or acceptable or comfortable for 1st century times either. The idea that Jesus died and rose again, which people often think of as a crazy idea today, was a crazy idea two thousand years ago as well.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells us as much: “For the message about Christ’s death on the cross is nonsense to those who are being lost...”

If you don’t understand, if you have that spark of belief, if you don’t “get it”, it is a crazy message. It is nonsense. But if you do “get it”, well Paul goes on to say “for us who are being saved it is God’s power”.

If you do have your faith in Jesus, then the message of the cross is truly the power of the God.

For us, we know the message of the cross as the power of God. But sometimes we might question, or doubt. Sometimes we might even be embarrassed by the message of the cross. The message of the cross and the idea that someone might rise from the dead doesn’t sit well with the ideas and the

philosophies and the world views of most people today. For most people in the world, for people who haven't heard, or who have been taught something else, or who have rejected Jesus, the message of Jesus is just nonsense.

And there we have a division – between those who know the power of God, and those who reject it.

Earlier in Luke's gospel (12:51) we read that Jesus told his disciples "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division."

That division though, is not up to us. Neither Paul nor Jesus talk about people being excluded by others on the basis of race or background or gender or occupation or disease or whatever. No one is unacceptable to God. God accepts all who turn to him in faith.

And that is the division, for those who turn to him in faith, and those who do not. Those who turn to Jesus in faith, and those who do not. Those who accept the good news of Jesus rising from death, and those who do not. Those who are at a feast with father Abraham, those who are in the other place.

Rather than others deciding whether we're 'in or out', as the teachers of the law and pharisees of Jesus did, and indeed many people do today would do, the choice is always ours.

And as much as we might like there to be shades of grey, it is a black and white choice. We're either in or we're not. It is not possible to be a 'little bit right with God' or a 'little bit saved' than it is to be a 'little bit pregnant'.

That's not to say that we don't change and grow in the knowledge and love of God, and grow in God's wisdom and faith during our Christian journey. But whether you have known Jesus for decades or for days, you are in.

Of course, we are human, and we live in an enlightened, scientific age. We like certainty, we like evidence, we like proof. Some Christians want to find archeological evidence of the events of the Bible – the location of the Garden of Eden, the remains of Noah's ark, or the ruins of the tower of Babel, in the belief that if people are offered such 'proof' they will turn to God. And there are many Christians who think that if we can just preach the gospel more convincingly, and come up with better arguments, and logical proofs of the existence of God, and present archaeological evidence of biblical events then people will be convinced.

But, as Jesus tells us, "...If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, then they will not be convinced even if someone were to rise from death."

How then should we share the news – the good news – of Jesus? We can't rely on evidence or logic or argument to convince people of the truth – but it's not our job to convince people. It is the Holy Spirit working in their hearts who will convince people – who will give them that spark of faith that moves them from thinking that the message of the cross is nonsense, to coming to know it as the very power of God.

But it is our task as Christians people to be witnesses to the power of God. To live as God would have us live, in a world where God is often not considered at all or a world where God is not known. We

should be witnesses through our words when the occasion arises, but we should be witnesses through our lives always.

In John's gospel, Jesus told his disciples "But I am giving you a new command. You must love each other, just as I have loved you. If you love each other, everyone will know that you are my disciples." (John 13:34-35)

When we hear the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, it's easy to be distracted by the detail presented of heaven and hell. But we need to always remember that those details are included only to make the point of the parable: That there is division between those who choose to know God, and those who do not, and that even the most convincing arguments, the hardest evidence is not going to budge those who don't.

So let's rejoice that we have that spark of faith, that we have come to know the message of Jesus – that he died and rose again – not as nonsense, but as the power of God. Let's live our lives as witnesses to Jesus, and so that by our love for one another, all people will know that we are his disciples and we can look forward to the day that "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Hab 2:14)

Amen.