

Luke 16v19-31 The Rich Man & Lazarus 21st March 2024

This parable shows the power of a story. Unusually one of the characters was named, and the only person who the New Testament has under this name was the brother of Mary and Martha. Some have suggested that making Lazarus a beggar would have been an amusing joke as he was from a rich family, having property and the ability to entertain a group. The name Lazarus has the meaning – without help. The poor man presented here was helpless and subject to the vagaries of a condemned life without the mitigation of money to ease his burdens.

Having the burdens eased is not a good thing. How hardly shall a rich man enter the Kingdom of God? Luke 18v25. The rich man here was ignorant of the danger he was in, blinded by comfort he spent no time with God, instead he indulged himself in the luxuries which he surrounded himself with. The poor man, on the other hand, was constantly aware of his need for God. He was forced to confront his own limitations everyday and was never far from pray for divine assistance. In this way he was made closer to God by his poverty. Let it not be a temptation to move to a more affluent society, it chokes the spirituality out of the people and kills the children of the faithful with spiritual death even as the level of comfort and affluence increases.

Under Roman law no ordinary citizen was allowed to wear the colour purple, it was legally reserved for Senators and foreign royalty. Fine linen was also restricted to the very rich it was expensive to wear and was reserved as best wear not daily wear for so many others less well off. He “*fared sumptuously every day*” Nestle translates this as – “*being merry every day splendidly*”. His life had no struggle trial or suffering, so because he did not care for God, God declined to afflict him with any tribulation. The world regards this as a blessed life and is jealously pursued, but those of the spirit know better than to seek such a life.

The poor man was a beggar and “had been placed” at the rich man’s gate. This is where the parable becomes obvious as not being grounded in reality but is a concocted story. No pompous rich man would allow the beggar to be outside his gate. He would not want the embarrassment, nor the constant reminder that others were so much worse off than themselves. All rich men have such vagabonds removed from such proximity. That he was placed (had been) there suggests that he was not able to walk, so his suffering was more extreme. He was full of sores which often come when you are unable to move your body but are left in the same position continually. This was one sorry individual and like Job, is presented as an extreme case of a suffering individual. The dogs licked his sores, so he got some relief not from people but from the wider creation which God has made. This is also so often true. Our pain and suffering being eased from unlikely directions, but all very welcome to the afflicted.

All he wanted was the sustenance which was not needed which randomly fell from the rich man’s table. This did not continue indefinitely but the man died. This was an end to his suffering but in death there is no power to know, far less in wisdom’s way to go, as our hymn highlights! The rich man also died as all men are doomed to do! It is part of the curse rightly inflicted upon mankind by God because of sin.

In death there is no conscious existence, see Psalm 146v3,4 & Ecclesiastes 9v5,6 so why does Jesus paint the picture in this way as if there was? He was using dramatic language for effect. If we examine the details of the rest of the parable, we will see that it was never meant to be understood literally, but is a word picture, using exaggerated language to drive home the necessary message. We have already seen the extremes used in setting up the narrative with both the rich and poor man.

The rich man seeks only to have his tongue cooled by water whilst in a flame! This is absurd that anyone would make this request is suffering so. They would rather ask for the flame to be doused or

for them to be released out of the flame, to offer this as a real request is illogical, something Jesus never exhibits, something else is going on here. It is not a real conversation by the dead, even if the dead could talk.

Secondly, it is clear that this is not talking about disembodied spirits as so many body parts are used in the parable after death; bosom, eyes, finger and tongue. Also, certain actions are taken which need other body parts, muscles to lift up the eye, larynx and lungs to enable him to speak, skin to feel to the temperature, ears to hear the reply. This is not Jesus teaching us that spirits go to different places upon death.

What are the details of these two places?

Abraham's bosom

With father Abraham (But not God or christ)
flame

Free to visit earth to witness to the living

Served by angels
tormentors

Hell or hades

Tormented in a

Unable to exit

No mention of

Where is Abraham now? Hebrews 11v39,40 informs that he has not yet received the promise made to him. He awaits the resurrection in order to receive that reward, Luke 20v33-38, but is now dead and lives only to God. Jesus was not teaching here counter to what he taught elsewhere.

In Genesis 25v8 it says of Abraham that he *"gave up the ghost (spirit) and died in a good old age as an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people"*. This means that there is no separation at death, all go the same place where all people go, into the ground, the grave, the tomb. There is no transportation to another realm after a determination is made as to worthiness, as so many wrongly believe. Just was not contradicting theses scriptures by using this parable, he was teaching through

storytelling, using stories that were not to be understood literally but never the less which contained truths to be received.

Jesus used the Greek word hades in verse 23. Hades as the Greeks understood it was a distinct place with various outlined details all unscriptural. No one would surely reason that by using this word Jesus was teaching others to accept these concepts as well!

Looking again at these two imaginary states we that :

There is communication between these two states

It is possible to see the other state from each state

They are afar off

There is a great gulf fixed Greek – chasma, from which we get chasm in the English.

The rich man seemed very concerned about his five natural brothers who were in his father's house, which seems very gracious of him. Perhaps he was remorseful for his sins and now wished to be more charitable, saving others from what he could not be saved from himself. This is not how sinners act. The basic selfishness present in all sinners had been reformed by suffering a torment! No Jesus is not teaching that this was a reformatory purgatory or place of second chance. He was instead ridiculing the absurd stories and illogical constructions others put into their perceptions of life after death. Jesus used hyperbole and ridicule many times, it was an effective teaching tool.

The appeal to Abraham to send one back from the dead, is a reference by Jesus to the inability of those set against God to be convinced by any miracle. The parable argues that what is necessary is to listen to the teachings of Moses and the Prophets, but sadly we know that no one is really very interested in these scriptures. Miracles have a temporary effect and can have significant but time limited impact on those who observe them.

However, they ultimately do not reform the heart towards the Eternal.

Sadly, when Jonah was in effect returned from the dead, having been given up for dead in the belly of a whale for three days and three nights, his witness was received and the people of Ninevah did repent, chapter 3v5. This then is a specific indictment aimed primarily at the Jewish people themselves!

Is it a coincidence that the person who was most visible as one who came back from the dead before Jesus himself was Lazarus? In John 12v9-11 we are told that *“because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away and believed on Jesus”*. He was a powerful witness to the power of God over death. There were others also who were raised by the power of God invested in Jesus, but it had no lasting affect on the vast majority of Jewish citizens. They were not listened to, nor has the resurrection of Jesus been accepted by most Jews down through history in that generation and all subsequent ones. Neither do they believe Moses and the prophets although they claim that they do!

A Voice from the Altar

Russel Noonan