

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
Luke 16:19-3, 1 Timothy 6:6-19
Lazarus in our midst

Throughout his Gospel, Luke tells us how the poor and needy have a special place in God's heart, and how, in God's realm, things get reversed — those who are ignored or looked down on in society have a special place of honour in God's kingdom. Remember how the Magnificat talks about God filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. And in the sermon on the plain, Jesus says the poor are blessed, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven – but 'woe' to those who are rich, for, as he says, 'you have received your consolation.' These are all themes that underlie the story told in the Gospel reading.

It's a well-known folk tale in the ancient world, but in the hands of Luke's Jesus it's given a new take. And by the way, it's not a story about what happens after we die – and this Lazarus isn't to be confused with the one that Jesus raised from death. Jesus' concern is about how we're living now – making real in the present, God's desires for all people. God's kingdom isn't just for tomorrow. It's about how we live here and now.

So, what might this tale teach us? For a start there's a lesson about compassionate care for those in need – for those who, as Luke tells us, mean much to God. This is brought home by the fact that in this story the rich man is anonymous, and the poor man has a name. In life, it's usually the other way around. Those living on the streets, the refugee we see on TV, are so often nameless, but the wealthy have their faces all over the media and their names on buildings, but not so here. The poor man, covered with sores and longing to satisfy his hunger, is named. He's Lazarus. Those in need aren't statistics. They're children of God – our sisters, our brothers. But the rich man, dressed in purple and fine linen, and who feasted sumptuously – who did nothing for Lazarus – is nameless.

Listening to this story, you may recognise Lazarus: walking past him in the street, or relying on food banks to feed her family, or perhaps struggling to survive on a benefit or the minimum wage. But sometimes Lazarus isn't quite so obvious. I recall meeting Lazarus at the airport. I was waiting to board my flight. I had sat down in the departure lounge and was reading. Then Lazarus sat next me and started talking. "It's been really cold." I said something like, "Yes, I guess it has." I didn't want to encourage Lazarus because I wanted to read my book, but Lazarus insisted on chattering away. I heard about her grandchildren in Australia and her son she hadn't seen in years. I kept looking at my book, half-listening to her. Then she said. "My husband died this time last year. We were married 50 years." Lazarus was no longer a disturbance to my reading. She was a person – a grieving, lonely person who I needed to be with – even for just a few minutes. Her grief was such that she was prepared to talk to a complete stranger about it. She didn't want advice. She didn't want money. She simply needed someone to listen to her for a few minutes – to be with her.

Wanting to read my book, rather than listen to this woman, put me in the place of the rich man. I didn't want to be disturbed. That's how it was with him. He didn't kick Lazarus. He didn't abuse him. He just didn't notice him or want to notice him. He couldn't be bothered with him. Where is Lazarus in our midst? Is he across the street or next-door? Perhaps we've met her here, and she's just waiting for one of us to call and listen to her story.

Christian love at its best is a verb – a commitment to do. From the beginning, from the time of Moses and the prophets, God has insisted that Lazarus is very important, and that the way we treat the person in need will somehow be directly connected to the way God deals with us. The way we choose to respond to the person who is poor, in need, oppressed – who is on the outside, who is lonely or

bereft – the way we use our money and resources, our time and energy to love and care for such people, affects both us and them – and it matters very much to God. The name ‘Lazarus’ means ‘God is my help.’ Can we make room in our world for Lazarus? Can we be God’s help to her or him?

In the story, when the rich man is in hell, he asks that Lazarus be sent back to warn his brothers who are still alive. He wants them to be told the score so that they can change their ways and not end up where he is. When this tale was told in other religious traditions, this request was granted, and someone was allowed to return from the dead with a message, but not here. Abraham answers, ‘If they won’t listen to Moses and the Prophets, they’re not going to be convinced by someone who rises from the dead.’ Jesus is making a point to the religious leaders of the day. They knew what the Hebrew Scriptures said about caring for the poor and needy, but they had chosen to ignore it. So, they weren’t going to have their minds changed by someone coming back from the dead to warn them. They had made their choice. They were lovers of money. As the letter to Timothy puts it, ‘For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil...’ It’s not money itself that’s evil, but the desire for and grasping of riches. As last week’s Gospel passage warned us, we cannot serve God and money. Rather, if we have the money, we’re encouraged, as the letter puts it, ‘To do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.’

I wonder, what does this mean about the choices we make – about how we respond to suffering and inequality. What does it mean for us personally, for us as a faith community, as a city, and as a nation?

We can’t separate our faith from how we respond to others, and our relationship with God isn’t for our safe keeping after we die. It’s for now. It’s for making God’s love real to those about us. It’s about a relationship that leads us to make love real to Lazarus in our midst.

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