

Sermon 25 September 2022

Luke 16:19-31

The story of Lazarus and the rich man highlights a theme that runs through the New Testament and is central to the teaching of Jesus – What can we do, should we do for those less fortunate than ourselves? What does it really mean ‘to love our neighbour?’

Lazarus is poor, poor to the extent that he is starving and covered in sores. Poverty invariably leads to poor health and therefore the inability to function to our potential. This impacts on our ability to earn a living and make our way in the world. A former President of the World Bank said, ‘Absolute poverty is a condition of life so limiting as to prevent realization of the potential of the genes with which one is born, a condition of life so degrading as to insult human dignity, and yet a condition of life so common as to be the lot of some 40% of the peoples of the developing countries.’

So not only does poverty lead to deprivation and ill health, it is actually far more widespread than we would care to think. So surely that amplifies our responsibility to do our little bit to alleviate the problem.

So we come to the rich man. Why do we find ourselves feeling a degree of antipathy towards him? There is nothing against riches as such in the New Testament. The rich man was not condemned because he was rich but because he was heartless. Lazarus would have been happy with the rich man’s leftovers but it appears that he wasn’t even prepared to give him those. Now, that is really heartless.

It is interesting that the rich man is not given a name. That could be because we shouldn’t be relating to him. Hopefully not, anyway. I want to share with you the story of someone whose name we are very familiar with – Albert Schweitzer.

In 1950 a committee representing 17 different nations voted Albert Schweitzer ‘the man of the century.’ Two years later he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Now Schweitzer was something of a genius. He was a philosopher, a theologian, a respected historian, a concert soloist and a missionary doctor. But the most remarkable thing about him was his deep Christian faith. It was a faith that shaped his life.

At the age of 21, Schweitzer promised himself that he would enjoy art and science until he was 30, then he would devote the rest of his life to working with the needy. On his 30th birthday he enrolled in university to get a degree in medicine, his plan being to go to Africa to work among the poor as a missionary doctor. The rest is history.

He opened a hospital in what was then called Equatorial Africa. He died there in 1965 at the age of 95. What motivated Schweitzer to turn his back on fame and wealth and work among the poorest of the poor in Africa? He said that one of his influences was his

meditation on today's gospel about the rich man and Lazarus. He said, 'It struck me as incomprehensible that I should be allowed to live such a happy life, while so many people around me were suffering.'

That brings us back to the gospel story itself. The sin of the rich man was that he simply ignored Lazarus. The sin of the rich man was not a sin of commission, that is, doing something he shouldn't have done. It was a sin of omission, that is, failing to do something he should have done.

It is a sin we are all guilty of. We convince ourselves that we are too busy, which simply means, of course, that we have other priorities; or that the problem is far too big for us to make a difference. Well, we might not have the talents of Albert Schweitzer but we do have the talent to give, to love, and that is a priceless talent. And if every single one of us puts that talent to work, we can surely make a difference.

In the end, it is about our priorities. And those priorities, as was the case with Schweitzer, should be determined by our faith. Schweitzer was driven by his faith, and so should we be. What better example of this than that of the late Queen Elizabeth 11. As a young woman, she committed herself to God and the service of people. The outpouring of grief we have witnessed over the past two weeks has not so much been a recognition of the monarchy itself but rather a recognition of someone who gave selfless service to millions of people that was unparalleled.

I repeat the quote I gave you three weeks ago from Martin Luther King: 'Life's most persistent and urgent question is, *'What are you doing for others?'*'

Speaking of priorities, the final word goes to General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe in World War 11 and later became President of the United States, who said, *'Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies, in the end, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed.'* Coming from an army man of his stature, that certainly makes a statement about priorities.