

Sunday 25th September 2022 Ordinary 26 Addington

Readings: 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

Reflection: The rich man & Lazarus *or* How we use our long-Handled Spoons

Some of you may recall last week's challenging gospel story of the Dishonest Manager. We concluded with these words of reflection¹:

'This life prepares us, tests and invites us to be conscious and willing to live by kingdom values. God gives us resources that not only provide for *our* needs, but also allow us to demonstrate our faithfulness to kingdom values.

In a nutshell, our attitude to possessions (and relationships), how we use and share the resources of this life, matters – to ourselves, to our communities and to God, the giver of life and eternal mammon.' Unquote

In *today's* gospel from the same chapter of Luke, which Jesus tells to the *Pharisees*, the rich man is so entrapped and enslaved by his own attitude and possessions, so completely self-absorbed, that no-one else exists or holds any value for him. And he, having ignored the plight of the poor, starving, sore-afflicted Lazarus at his gate, while himself feasting on sumptuous food every day, doesn't *change* his attitude to Lazarus – even from his place of eternal fiery torment.

From across the chasm of his *self*-inflicted separation, the unnamed rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to him (to be – in a way - his after-life slave) to relieve him of his agony – to touch his burning tongue with a water-soaked finger. (How utterly unconscious is that?!)

Lazarus the *untouchable* - poor, starving, unclean with dog-licked sores - is now, even beyond death, being requested to ease the rich man's plight – even to *touch* his tongue! And not only that - when his request is declined the rich man then pleads that Lazarus be sent off to warn his five earthly brothers, that they may turn from their self-absorbed ways and avoid the torment of Hades.

You may have heard the story of the rabbi asking God to give him a glimpse of heaven and Hadesⁱⁱ, to which he agreed. First the rabbi was shown a large room with a cooking pot full of delicious stew bubbling away in the centre. Many people sat around the pot, each one dipping a long-handled spoon into the stew. But the people were pale and thin, and there was an icy stillness in the air. The spoon handles were so long that the stew couldn't reach the people's mouths. Then the rabbi was shown another room looking just like the first, but this time, the contented people surrounding the cooking pot were enjoying lively conversation.... As they used their long-handled spoons to feed each other!

In Jesus' story, aimed at the Pharisees, Abraham makes it quite clear that they *all* should have listened, to Moses and the prophets - they had the law and prophets as their life-time guide to right living and right relationship with God. They had chosen to ignore it. *'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'* – the gospel writer not only refers to poor Lazarus, but also points to the implications of Jesus' resurrection and would-be followers' responses.

In a glimpse of absolute clarity when confronting eternity, the rich man in Jesus' story (traditionally known as 'Dives', which means 'rich man') becomes aware of the waste that his life has been through ignoring the poor, vulnerable and totally dependent Lazarus at his gate. He has chosen absolute isolation by ignoring the plight of others less fortunate.

Some of you may have heard me speak of the book, 'Faith and Struggle on Smokey Mountain'ⁱⁱⁱ by Filipino priest, Fr. Benigno Beltran. As chaplain (for three decades) to the 25,000 scavengers who lived and often died on 'Smokey Mountain' - the vast, disease and toxin-ridden garbage dump that burned continuously in Manila for more than fifty years – Fr. Beltran tells the story of a people betrayed and abandoned by modern society. He tells of a wondrous planet being destroyed by greed and excess, and of a God of mystery and consuming fire who is discovered among the desolation.

Fr. Beltran writes: *'Behind every piece of plastic in the garbage dump is the whole universe. In the suffocating heat of the crackling inferno, the deathly smell, the continuous din of garbage trucks vomiting their load, I was reminded that Smokey Mountain was a metaphor for a world gone terribly wrong^{iv}.'*

Jesus' gospel illustration is not an 'out-of-this-world' fabrication. Ignoring the plight of the poor was a human reality in first century Palestine. Sadly, it is still a reality today.

Fr. Beltran reflected on his Smokey Mountain ministry:

While I celebrated God's bounty in the Eucharist, I was surrounded by starving children with swollen bellies, many with pus-encrusted eyes, skins covered in boils. I winced every time they took my hand and touched it to their foreheads in reverence. In my desolation, I raised the host as far as I was able, in my mind raising it higher than the summit of the garbage mountain, beyond the clouds and the stars, beyond the farthest quasar and supernova in the observable universe. "On an altar surrounded with flies, accept, O Lord, this sacrifice^v."

And, in the midst of Fr. Beltran's courageous engagement with broken humanity, he wrote:

'I wanted to run away constantly, but as I blessed and unctioned with holy oils the dead bodies of stillborn children thrown into black plastic bags, the bloodied frail bodies of young people run over by bulldozers, the bullet-riddled bodies of suspected criminals and rebels thrown into the trash heaps, it seemed as if I heard a distant divine voice, say, "This is my body^{vi}."

Today we see the broken body of Christ in mass graves in the Ukraine, in arrested Russian protestors and oppressed Iranian women, in the thousands of children dying from

malnourishment and disease each year, while annual world military spending is over a trillion dollars.

The body of Jesus was sold for thirty pieces of silver and nailed to a cross – worthless and hopeless. And yet we – the people of resurrection life – gather week by week at Christ’s table and *receive* the bread that feeds the world. This is the mystery. This is the Sacrament.

We, as disciples of Jesus - as part of the broken body of Christ - are called, not to Hades, not to the chasm of self-absorption, but to help bring in the kingdom of *heaven* on earth.

As commentator Jim Friedrich writes:

‘In Luke’s gospel, the parable always ends the same way, no matter how many times we read it. ‘Dives’ the rich man will stay stuck in the prison of his own making for as long as the story is told. If we want a new ending, we must write it with our own lives and times, as we push through the gate into a deeper union, a more loving communion with our fellow creatures. This is not only radical personal work, it is also the collective endeavour of Church and society.

In a time when the common good and neighbourly love are in acute peril, love and mercy ceaselessly call us to choose the better way.’ Unquote

Put simply, we are called to bring out our proverbial ‘long-handled spoons’ and bring life to others.

Helen Roud

ⁱ Roud, Helen. *The Dishonest Manager – Making Sense of a Challenging Parable*, Ordinary 25 Homily 180922

ⁱⁱ Silf, Margaret. *One hundred Wisdom Stories from around the world*. Lion Hudson, Oxford, 2011 p57

ⁱⁱⁱ Beltran, Benigno P. *Faith and Struggle on Smokey Mountain: Hope for a Planet in Peril* Orbis Books, 2012

^{iv} Ibid, p.10

^v Ibid, p.2

^{vi} Ibid, p.9