

Sermon 25th September 2022

This morning we will examine another one of Jesus' parables, a story with multiple levels of meaning. We will think about who this parable was aimed at; who was listening in to this story, in its original setting. We will then think about what it means to us as the people of the 21st century. But before we do all that I would like to briefly comment on today's reading from Paul's letter to Timothy. At times the four readings of the lectionary have little connection but this week we are fortunate to hear some wise words on how to handle wealth. As I mentioned last week, the gospel of Luke is full of stories about the rich and the poor and one of the gospels core themes is the reversal of the way things are, or in other words, the first becoming the last and the last becoming the first. So if you have riches, and remember as citizens of Australia we all sit in the top ten per cent of global wealth, how do we handle money?

Paul reminds Timothy that we can't take our riches with us and that it is far better to grow into godliness and be content with what we have. Echoing Jesus words from Luke last week, 'you cannot serve both God and money', Timothy is warned of the dangers of seeking riches. Paul writes that many who have focused on building material have wandered away from God entirely. The last few verses of the letter are almost a manifesto for Christians like most of us, who enjoy a comfortable lifestyle. Listen once again:

17 As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches but rather on God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, 19 thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

What do you think Paul means by instructing us to take hold of the 'life that really is life'? What an odd kind of statement. Well, we only need to think back through Luke's gospel to understand that life in Christ is a like new life, a life into which we are born again, and this new life is the real life, it's eternal life right here, right now. In Luke's gospel people are drawn into the kingdom of heaven the moment they believe, heaven is not some distant shore, a place for the life hereafter, it is a present and lived experience.

And that thought leads us into today's parable. If we read this parable as an account of what happens after death, that is a factual description of heaven and hell we are open to a whole lot of poor theology and misconceptions. In Jesus' day the general believe that was those who knew and loved God remained with God eternally, those who did not know God simply died, they perished and remained no longer, there was no theology of eternal torment, that we seem to have made up for ourselves. So for Jesus' original audience this is almost a playful story, yet one with a very deep and poignant lesson.

Like Jesus' original audience most of us will be moved by Jesus' description of poor Lazarus, Jesus lays it on thick by telling us that the dogs would come and lick his sores, how sad and emotionally moving is that! So when we hear about the reversal of fortunes in the story

most of us will go, “well that’s fair”. Jesus is a brilliant story teller and this parables conclusion is particularly clever. The rich man tells Father Abraham that if someone from the dead goes to speak to his living siblings, they will repent.’ No says, Abraham, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

If the Pharisees are still listening to Jesus will this story haunt them when they hear the news that Jesus has been raised from death? Perhaps, some of them were, but that was then what about now? What does this parable have to say to us? This parable reminds us to live as the people of God’s kingdom right here, right now, there is no time like the present to ‘pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. We must fight the good fight of the faith in this moment, and take hold of the eternal life to which we have been called. I wonder how Jesus story would end if the rich man had invited poor Lazarus to dine with him?

I could finish there with that thought but there is one more thing I would like to share with you. As I have prepared this service the old hymn *There’s a wideness in God’s mercy* has been playing in my head. I realised that it was in contrast to the “great chasm’ that no one can pass in Jesus’ story. So when I said this parable is playful before, I didn’t mean that its simple or childish, it is playful in that it give us space and room to play with its images, to test its boundaries with what we know about our gracious God and loving Saviour. So when I bring all that I know and believe about Jesus Christ and push that into the great chasm, depicted in today’s story, I wonder are all things truly possible with God, as the scriptures proclaim. Will Jesus Christ be the one who traverses the great chasm bringing the good news, and the living waters of God’s kingdom to all people?

I will follow up that thought with a few verses from Frederick Faber’s beautiful old hymn.

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There’s a kindness in His justice,
Which is more than liberty.

There is welcome for the sinner,
And more graces for the good;

There is mercy with the Saviour;
There is healing in His blood.

For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of our mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.

But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.

Was there ever kinder shepherd
Half so gentle, half so sweet,
As the Saviour who would have us
Come and gather at His feet?

Amen.