

26TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR C (2025)

There are times when a particular passage of Scripture resonates so strongly with us, that it brings us up short; and, for me, today's Gospel reading is one such text. For some months now, a homeless person has made the church grounds his home; and, notwithstanding several attempts to engage and no small number of misgivings on my part, complaints and safeguarding concerns in relation to the nursery in the church hall have meant that we have had to ask the police to move him on. Sadly, he had been engaging in criminal behaviour, was difficult, and had refused help and shelter; but, when I read this morning's Gospel reading in preparation for this sermon, I have to confess that I felt more than a little ashamed by the way I have treated him – not always with the compassion that he deserved; but, rather, as an irritation, and a problem to be solved.

So, we all know a Lazarus, because he is our neighbour: whether it be the homeless person or someone begging outside Sainsbury's, our world and our lives are full of modern-day Lazaruses, if only we would open our eyes to see them. Jesus' parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus – or Dives and Lazarus, as it is traditionally known – serves not only as a reminder of how our attitudes towards the poor and less fortunate can harden our hearts to their plight, and cause us to be mean-spirited in our response to them; but also, it challenges our notions of true poverty and riches in the light of the Gospel, and bids us reassess our understanding of Jesus' mission, and the true nature of the Kingdom of God.

Because, this morning's parable is not primarily a moral tale about poverty and riches: like many folk tales in the ancient world, it speaks of a great reversal, in which those who are rich in this life will not be so in the next; and those who live in poverty now, will be rewarded with riches in the life to come. But even that isn't what this parable is really about: because, like all of Jesus' parables, it seeks to illustrate in picture-language something that is going on in Jesus' own work – his proclamation of the Kingdom of God, and his insistence that, in that Kingdom, the poor and the outcast, the destitute and written-off, have first place. And, in teaching this parable to the Pharisees, Jesus was making clear that they, the wealthy, social and religious elite, were guilty of behaving towards those whom Jesus welcomed in the same way in which Dives had treated Lazarus: their disdain for, and dismissal of, the poor, outcasts and sinners who gathered around Jesus, was akin to Dives' contempt for, and neglect of, Lazarus, whom the Jewish Law and Prophets demanded that he treat with generosity and compassion. And so, the whole point of this parable turns on its ending: Jesus is asking that the Pharisees fulfil their obligations to those for whom their Scriptures have a particular care – the Scriptures that Jesus fulfils, and whose obligations to charity he embodied and exemplified in his own life and ministry. But he also makes clear that the Pharisees, and the whole people of Israel, face a point of decision: whether or not to accept Jesus' claims, and to enter his Kingdom, which will be inaugurated in, and made manifest by, his rising from the dead.

And it is Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God that provides the lens through which we might interpret and apply this parable to our own lives today: because it is only by understanding its truly radical and subversive nature that we can make Jesus' vision our own. Ultimately, the key to understanding all of Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God is found in the Lord's Prayer: in asking that 'thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven', we commit ourselves to play our part in anticipating the age to come in the present, though we necessarily recognise that the Kingdom will only come in all its fulness with the Second Coming of Christ, and the restoration of all things in him.

But that does not absolve us from living with the vision of that Kingdom before our eyes now, nor from seeking to advance in its virtues, and extend its orbit to include all for whom Jesus had a special care. And what that means in practice is that we must take seriously Jesus' example to treat everyone with equal respect and dignity, wherever they come from, whether rich or poor, and whatever their circumstances might be. Jesus' eyes saw beyond outward appearances, and so must ours, if we are truly to imitate him in defying the culture of our age, which is dominated by envy, grievance, and identity politics. Because, for Christians, our true identity is found in Jesus Christ: in him, we are not subsumed or diminished; but, rather, we are offered the potential to become most fully ourselves; which, in turn, enables us to look beyond narrow tribal identities and associations, and to see all human persons as those created in the

image and likeness of God, and worthy of our attention, generosity and care. The problem with the Pharisees of Jesus' day is that they considered themselves justified and morally superior, whilst shielding themselves against material hardship, and those who might embody it, with their wealth. And, so it is with us today: of course, material comfort continues to blinker us to the plight of the less fortunate, however relative; but we also succumb to those subtle temptations to harden our hearts to those with different opinions and lifestyles to our own, diminishing their value, and causing us to consider ourselves more virtuous than they, and to treat them with barely-veiled contempt. Lazarus is not just the homeless man in the church grounds; he is every person to whom we close our eyes and ears, our hearts and minds, and thus deny their right to human dignity, however wrong or wayward we might believe them to be.

We live in an imperfect world, in which we Christians must make moral judgments, influenced by our faith, and sometimes those choices will be costly and far from easy. But our vocation is to effect the change that we believe to be God's will for our world, as set forth in the Gospel; and thus, in small ways, to advance the sphere and influence of his Kingdom. This will require courage, and that we wake from our complacency, and challenge the unjust structures within our society, and prejudices within ourselves, that perpetuate the comfort of the few at the expense of the many. For, in the final analysis, we will be judged not for having been on the 'right side of history', but on the practical love and mercy that we have shown to all the Lazaruses who have met us on our way.