

RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

An old couple died in a car crash and went to heaven.

They were both 85 – had been married almost 60 years and had been in good health the last ten years mainly due to her interest in health food, and taking exercise.

When they reached the pearly gates, St. Peter took them to their mansion which was decked out with a beautiful kitchen and master bathroom suite and Jacuzzi. As they *"oohed and aahed"* the old man asked Peter how much all this was going to cost.

"It's free," Peter replied, *"this is Heaven."*

Next they went out back to survey the championship golf course that the home backed up to. They would have golfing privileges everyday and each week the course changed to a new one representing the great golf courses on earth.

The old man asked, *"What are the green fees?"*

Peter's reply, *"This is heaven, you play for free."*

Next they went to the club house and saw a lavish buffet lunch with the cuisines of the world laid out.

"How much is it to eat?" asked the old man.

"You're just not getting this! This is heaven, it is free!" Peter replied with some exasperation.

"Well, where are the low fat and low cholesterol tables?" the old man asked timidly.

Peter lectured, *"That's the best part...you can eat as much as you like of whatever you like and you never get fat and you never get sick. This is heaven."*

With that the old man went into a huge fit of rage, throwing down his hat and stomping on it, and shrieking wildly.

Peter and his wife both tried to calm him down, asking him what was wrong.

The old man looked at his wife and said, *"This is all your fault. If it weren't for your blasted bran muffins, I could have been here ten years ago!"*

Here's another tale...

A man arrives at the gates of heaven. St. Peter asks, *"Denomination?"*

The man says, *"Methodist."*

St. Peter looks down his list, and says, *"Go to room 24, but be very quiet as you pass room 8."*

A woman arrives at the gates of heaven. *"Denomination?"*

"Lutheran."

"Go to room 18, but be very quiet as you pass room 8."

Another man arrives at the gates. *"Denomination?"*

"Presbyterian."

"Go to room 11, but be very quiet as you pass room 8."

The man says, *"I can understand there being different rooms for different denominations, but why must I be quiet when I pass room 8?"*

St. Peter tells him, "Well the Baptists are in room 8, and they think they're the only ones here!"

Now these stories are jokes.

Imagine if you started thinking that I was literally describing heaven and hell.

Imagine if you said our minister teaches that when we die we go to a set of gates up in the sky and we have to ask a man called Peter if we can get into heaven. Or our minister believes that when you get to heaven you have to play golf or that heaven is like a hotel where you each get a room number.

These stories are just jokes.

The first one about the angry man is a nonsense joke.

The second one about certain groups of people thinking they'll be the only ones in heaven has got a slight theological point to it, but its still just a joke.

They are both stories and what matters is the punch-line.

When Jesus tells this story about two men who die and end up in the after-life he's not trying to teach us some details about what happens to us all when we die.

Lazarus dies and finds himself at a great feast.

Does that mean that when we die we will find ourselves at a giant table filled with food?

Or that the meal doesn't ever end...?

The idea of the characters in the story having a wee chat with Abraham is no more to be taken literally than the idea that when you get to heaven you need to speak to St Peter who is standing at some gates.

It's just a story Jesus told to make a point.

And what Jesus wants **us** to get is the point of the story. It's the point of the story that matters.

What Jesus is doing in this parable is pointing out something that matters greatly to God – how we live in this world and what kind of attitude we take with us through life.

And what is fascinating is that in the story the usual procedures are reversed.

In most stories of rich people, we know the names of these rich people. And in most reports that feature poor people – these folk are just an unnamed bunch.

'Normally, wealthy and powerful people are well-respected and expect people to know and remember their names, and impoverished people are disregarded. Even if they are seen in news footage of a crisis, they are not named and treated as individuals, but often as a problem to be solved, with everyone lumped together as "the homeless" or "the unemployed" or "the refugees". This reading from Luke turns this on its head.

In this reading, the rich man is not named, but the poor beggar is. His name is Lazarus, a common enough name of the time.'

(Hannah Moy, Starters For Sunday Sep 25 2016)

Often in the New Testament there are pieces of information that we'd love to get but we just don't – and that includes names.

Here is an example of the opposite – where a poor man's name is given – something that makes him more human and affirming him as someone precious to God.

What has the rich man in the story done wrong?
He has ignored the needs of his neighbour.

Its not what he does – its what he doesn't do...

You've probably heard of the Prosperity gospel – it's a version of Christianity pedalled in the main by rich TV pastors with their own private jets and fleet of luxury cars. Its based on the idea that Gods plan is to bless the people God loves with material wealth and possessions.

It's a load of rubbish of course, it attracts the greedy and fools the gullible but not many thinking Christians are likely to listen to this kind of stuff.

But for a great many more people there probably another (more subtle) idea that we might buy into and its this – the idea that what we have is down to us being decent people and the idea that the poor in some ways have it coming, because they are lazy, stupid, bad, or feckless.

In other words we can be tempted to believe that the reason why we have enough food and clothes and decent house to live in is because we are good people and we deserve it.

There is often a bit of a chasm between us and the woman flogging the big issue – a gap between us and the guy with the dog begging in the shop doorway – a divide between us and the people are having to sign on.

Maybe we need to remember that there for the grace of God go we.

For example, I've met more than one surgeon and his family who are living now in our country. Back home they lived a life of comparative luxury. It never occurred to them that one day they would be poor – living in an unwanted council flat in Scotland, trying to survive on a few pounds a week – prevented by law from working here and being often branded scroungers by the nearest neighbours around them.

How could it come to this?

Because they had the misfortune to be living in the wrong country at the wrong time when all hell broke loose in their country and they were forced to flee in terror.

From rich to poor overnight.....there are many ways it can happen.

Jesus is challenging us to notice those around us and to respond to those in need.

And it really doesn't matter in the end the reason for the need – whether the person has been stupid or feckless, or they're an addict, or whether they have been the innocent victims of others, or natural disaster, or seen their standard of life swept away by outside forces or redundancy – we are to care anyway.

And although Jesus isn't literally describing the afterlife – there **is**, in the end, an afterlife, and there is something in the heaven and hell descriptions.

Heaven means being close to God.
And Hell means cutting ourselves off from God.

The closest we get to God in this life the more we experience heaven.
The further away we are from God the more we experience Hell.

When our lives come to an end our stuff comes to an end and our status comes to an end too. And what will be left of us?

That rich man can't feast all he likes at the expense of others. No more can he do that.

And he can't order a poor man like Lazarus to do his bidding and bring him water or take messages to his brothers. No more can he do that.

Lazarus is no longer his subordinate or his slave or his servant.

When we think of the image of Lazarus at the **"rich man's door"** I think this parable is apt for our time.

For those of us in the west we have some poor people waiting at our door.

We are living at a time of refugee crisis.

The world has not seen anything like this since WW2.

Images abound of suffering.

The bodies of toddlers washed up on beaches.

Film of children caught up in bombed cities.

Families living now in cramped makeshift tents in large compounds.

Long lines of humanity standing at the borders of countries desperate for sanctuary.

Yesterdays papers reported 162 bodies of refugees pulled from the waters of the Mediterranean near the Egyptian coast. Apparently there are believed to be many more still to be found.

The story didn't generate too much news – because this kind of event now passes as commonplace in our new world.

Well, we can look away. We can keep our door shut and say this can be someone else's problem. And there are many in our country who would advocate just that. Who cares about them? We've got troubles of our own.

And, of course, there are many politicians who want to take that line too.

And then there are others who advocate compassion and action to help.

Those of us who are serious about being Christian have to belong to that second group.

We are mandated by scripture and mandated by Jesus to pay attention to those in need and to find ways to show concern and support.

A woman spoke about her husband who was a minister.

She said that every time he preached about wealth or poverty or justice there were a couple of folk in his congregation would give him a hard time.

They would say to him "*Why do you speak about these things? Why can't you just preach the Bible?*"

Why can't you just preach the Bible?

Well this **is** the Bible!

This is what the Bible says.

Issues of justice and wealth and poverty and caring for others come up again and again and again. We can't just wish it away.

It has certainly been a constant theme of the Bible readings for the last few weeks.

But sometimes we need to hear the same words over and over again before they sink in.

Its like the most basic of all facts: **God loves us.** God is on our side.

How many times have we heard that in church? So many times you couldn't count.

Yet some people *still wonder* if it's true.

We need to keep hearing that truth till it sinks deeply into us and we know it to be real.

God's care for justice is like that too.

If caring for the poor is not seen to be as central to Christians as it is in the Bible and as it is in the teachings of Jesus then it shows we still have some way to go.

We still need to hear these words of concern and compassion and we need to let them sink in and challenge what we are about in the way we live our lives and in the way we organise our church.

Luke 16: 19-31

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