

Jeremiah 32.1-3a, 6-15, 1 Timothy 6.6-15, Luke 16.19-31

Our readings this morning are asking in different ways what makes for a good life? Jeremiah demonstrates this by acting hopefully. He invests in the future even when the present is bleak. We learn quite a lot along the way about how to purchase property in ancient Israel. The letter to Timothy tells us that the good life is a blend of godliness and contentment. The Gospel is a very pointed story about a very rich man and a very poor man and what happened to them after death.

This is what used to be called a 'shaggy dog story' – an improbable, extreme tale making an unexpected point. Unexpected because those who heard this story might well have assumed that the rich man, with his designer clothes and Taste the Difference diet, owed his wealth to God's approval. The poor man on the other hand had probably offended the Almighty and deserved his fate. His utter poverty was proof of his unworthiness, the nasty little detail of the dogs who came to lick his sores just rubs it in that he was undesirable in every respect.

There is very little detail given. The rich man and Lazarus are isolated in their lives and deaths. We don't know what the rich man did with his time except dress and eat. And Lazarus – well at least he has a name – just lies and dies. And then comes the great - and probably to Jesus's hearers rather disagreeable - reversal of fortunes. Lazarus is carried away by the angels (so thin he could be lifted into the air), the rich man dies and was buried (so heavy he dropped like a stone). Lazarus ends up next to the patriarch Abraham, the rich man is tormented in a hot, nasty underworld. For the first time in his life (or rather in his death) Lazarus's needs are met and the rich man experiences need. And there is no communication possible between these two states of existence. A great chasm has been fixed, a great divide between the place of blessing and the place of torment.

Well. You never thought you'd get a real hellfire and damnation sermon at St Bene't's did you? But I am not sure that Jesus is taking us on a guided tour of the afterlife. The thing he is telling us something about two extremes of the human condition that we find played out all the time, between nations, in societies and families and even in ourselves. At one extreme there is simply need. Need of food and drink, need of shelter, need of health, need of friends, need of God. Lazarus is not virtuous, he is not a saint. He has nothing and is nothing and yet, in his raw humanity, apparently abandoned, unblessed, unloved, he is carried away by the angels.

Let's just stay with that for a few moments. What might that say to us? I think it is saying that in our raw, needy humanity God simply loves us. Which is not to say that he does not rejoice in our gifts and look kindly on our achievements, but that it is not *because* of these things that he loves us. His love is his love, and he knows that we are fragile and needy to the core of our being. All of us are a heartbeat away from being Lazarus.

At the other extreme is the rich man who has everything. He has food and drink, shelter, good health as far as we know until he dies. He has every outward sign of prosperity, every appearance of being the recipient of God's favour. And yet, when he dies, there is nothing there. Only the body to bury, and he ends up in a hot, choking and very lonely place.

We might simply moralise this story. The rich man has his come-uppance. He has, after all, ignored Lazarus lying at his gate. He could have helped and he didn't. He could have fed him, even the scraps, but he chose not to. And for those of us who have been brought up with ideals of equality, of righting wrongs and feeding the hungry and condemning the idle rich, the fate of the rich man is simple justice.

That's all fine and the letter to Timothy would back up this conclusion with its attack on wealth and its evils. Again this is not quite what the parable is about. Let's go down a different track. When the earthquake hit Haiti one of the things that was incomprehensible to many who watched the disaster unfold on television was the *faith* of those who lost everything. In our more affluent world people find natural disasters a barrier to faith. How could God do this? How could God cause this suffering? And we then get into a rather sterile debate about whether God is responsible for natural disasters or not. Contrast that with the really poor who have really suffered. And there they were after Haiti, on our television screens, among the ruins, weeping yes, desperate, yes, but also talking about God answering prayer, about trust and faith and thankfulness. Their suffering was not to them a sign that God had rejected them. They expected God to hear and help. They sang, they prayed, they thanked God for each day of survival, for each sip of water, each bowl of food.

Yet here I often hear people say how the onset of illness, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job has rocked their faith, or that such catastrophes were the last straw and now they don't believe in God anymore.

What that is saying is that God has been for them a kind of insurance policy, a guarantee of favour. They've thought they could bargain with God: Look I'll go to church and believe in you if you keep your side of the bargain and look after me and mine. And if this is what we really think, we are spiritually a lot nearer to the rich man than we are to poor Lazarus.

Our riches may take many forms. The riches of respectability, of the kind of moderate affluence that does not have to worry too much about tomorrow, the riches of being looked up to, the riches of good connections, the riches of good health. These are of course desirable things, but they are not guaranteed, and they are not the whole of life. We should ask ourselves whether the loss of such riches would leave us angry and bitter and without faith. Or humble, chastened, perhaps but not despairing, still able to be thankful, still able to have hope in the God who raises the dead.

In fact we really need to discover what faith means because neither riches, health, or wealth actually last. Those we most love, die. Pope Benedict preached in Glasgow, 'There is only one thing which lasts: the love of Jesus Christ personally for each one of you. Search for him, know him and love him and he will set you free'.

The Pope was preaching to the young, to those with the future before them. The freedom of Christ is to always be young, in the sense that the future is always ahead, it is to live with the perspective of eternity. 'Ad te fecisti nos...' 'thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee..' as Augustine says in the Confessions, words which are echoed in today's collect. The rich man lived only in the little bubble of time where he could be truly self-sufficient and only in his torment do we learn that he has relations, or that he actually recognizes Lazarus as the beggar at his gate. Perhaps that recognition carries the seeds of his eventual salvation, at least one early Christian commentator thought that the fact that he showed concern for his brothers was evidence of virtue which could in time be kindled into life and salvation. But for us the question remains, are we willing to put our faith in Jesus Christ? To live with his faith that time is redeemed, that suffering is not abandonment, that the resurrection reveals what really is and what will be. Look ahead to the figure on the cross behind the altar. Carved by a Franciscan Sister it shows the Lord Jesus Christ with his hands and eyes raised to heaven, offering himself to God for you and me and for our salvation. There is salvation for Lazarus, there is salvation for all of us, there is even salvation for the rich man, here and now, when we put our trust in Him.