

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

Amos 6. 1a, 4-7

1 Timothy 6. 6-19

Luke 16. 19-31

I speak to you in the name † of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus can be seen as a drama in three acts. In the first act, the rich appear to be rich, and the poor appear to be poor. The first act, however, is a *tableau* or painting. The characters are introduced, and their way of life is described, but nothing happens. There is no interaction between the rich man and Lazarus.

The rich man is not named, and the measure of his wealth is illustrated by his conspicuous consumption – his dress and his diet. The rich man wears purple, which may mean that he was a high-ranking official or a member of the royal family. The Romans had set standards regarding who could wear purple and how much purple they could wear. The rich man lived in a house with gates – for privacy or security, or for separation from the riffraff of the city. He dressed in fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day. He was, as they say, ‘at ease in Zion’: he had everything a person could want.

Lazarus is the only character in any of our Lord’s parables who is given a name. The name is part of the characterisation, because it comes from the name Eleazar, which means ‘God helps’, and therefore foreshadows Lazarus’s fate. Tragically, no-one helps Lazarus. He is a crippled beggar whose body is covered with running sores. He is ‘thrown’ before the rich man’s gate. He would gladly have eaten¹ even the soiled bread from the rich man’s table. You may know that at a feast, bread was used

¹ The Greek verb used here for ‘eat’ was commonly used for the feeding of animals rather than humans (cf. Rev 19. 21); but it is also used in Luke’s gospel to describe the longings of the hungry (cf. Lk 6. 21, 9. 17, 15. 16).

to wipe the grease from one's hands and then was thrown under the table.² The depth of Lazarus' deprivation is described in one final detail: the dogs (which probably ate the scraps from the rich man's table) lick Lazarus's sores as they pass by. The first act ends after we have met the two characters. Their lives seem to be entirely separate, divided by a table and a gate.

In the second act, the rich become poor and the poor become rich. At the beginning of this parable, the rich man was introduced first, as one would expect; followed by Lazarus. Now Lazarus's death, which comes as no surprise to us, is reported first. We do not know how Lazarus died; and indeed, the parable does not dwell on his death. At his death, Lazarus is transported by angels to the bosom of Abraham, which might be a suggestion that he was carried right up to heaven, in the manner of Enoch and Elijah. Nothing is said of Lazarus's burial. Neglected by others, Lazarus is prized in the sight of God. And then, unexpectedly, we are told that the rich man has died also. One wonders, did he die of overeating while Lazarus starved? The contrast between the two characters is highlighted when we read that Lazarus was 'carried away by angels' whilst the rich man was simply 'buried'.

The third act is by far the longest and the most developed. For the first time, narration gives way to dialogue, with three complete exchanges between the rich man and Abraham. The third act is therefore the climax of the story and the focal point of the parable. In the third act, the poor are rich and the rich are poor.

For the Jews, Hades was regarded as the place where the dead await final judgement. In the time of Jesus, and in 1st-century Jewish thought, Hades was thought to be divided into various regions, according to people's moral state. Lazarus, we are told, has been taken to the bosom of Abraham, which was regarded as the place of highest bliss as one awaited judgement. In this part of Hades, a spring of water was believed

² Cf. Mk 7. 28.

to be made available for the righteous. In spite of their privileged position, both Lazarus and Abraham were in the sight of the rich man, who was already experiencing the torment that awaited him.

Three exchanges between the rich man and Abraham follow. Lazarus, who never asked for anything on earth, never says anything. Abraham now speaks for the beggar who has no voice. In the first exchange, the rich man asks 'Father Abraham' to send Lazarus to dip his finger in water to cool his tongue. Because the rich man knows Lazarus's name, we may assume that the man had known of Lazarus's plight when he was alive, and done nothing. But Abraham replies that this will not be possible, and he makes a statement about the respective lives and rewards of the rich man and Lazarus. Now the men's fates are reversed: the rich man is in torment and Lazarus is in paradise.

The chasm that now separates the rich man and Lazarus confirms the finality of the judgement on the rich man. Once there was no chasm, but indifference and apathy. The rich man could have come to Lazarus at any time. Now, however, the chasm that separates them prevents Lazarus from responding to the rich man's torment with compassion and removes any possibility that the rich man will escape his torment. The rich man has shut himself off from Lazarus, and now no one can reach him.

In the second exchange, the rich man asks that Abraham send Lazarus back to warn the rich man's five brothers. If there is no hope for him, at least he may be able to intervene and spare his brothers. Admirably, the rich man thinks of someone other than himself for the first time in the story, but he still assumes that Lazarus can be his errand boy.

Abraham's response to the rich man's request is that the brothers have Moses and the prophets. Did not Moses say, 'Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbour' (Dt 15. 7)? And are not the words of Isaiah clear enough, when they speak of God requiring us to share our bread with the hungry (58. 6-7)?

The third and final exchange reveals the rich man's despair. He has little hope that his brothers will heed the Scriptures. For the brothers, repentance requires a complete reversal of their way of life, and a complete change in their regard for the poor at their gates. The rich man's last hope for his brothers is that if someone were to go to them from the dead, they would repent.

Abraham's response, which concludes the parable, adds finality to the urgency of hearing Moses and all the prophets. If the brothers will not hear them, then they will not be convinced even if one should rise from the dead.

The call to repentance has been lurking silently in the background from the beginning of the parable. There will be no special dispensation for those who refuse the needs of the wretched at their gates. If they will not hear the Scriptures and be merciful, they show that they have placed themselves beyond the reach of God's mercy.

By the end of the parable, the hearer's point of identification has become clear. The parable is addressed to 'lovers of money'. At the beginning of the parable, hearers or readers could assume that they are expected to identify with either the rich man or with Lazarus; but in actual fact, this parable is far more subtle. By the end of the parable, we realise that we stand in the place of the brothers, and the question is whether we will hear the Scriptures and repent.

Did the brothers ever get the message? We are not told, for that is the question that the parable leaves us to answer. Each of us will write our own ending to the story.

At the end of St Luke's gospel (24. 13-35), we are told of two men whose hearts were 'strangely warmed' when the Scriptures were interpreted to them. They were walking on the road to Emmaus. A stranger joined them and began to explain the law and the prophets. When evening came, the two insisted that the weary stranger share their table with them. Then, as they shared their bread with the stranger, they recognised that he was Christ. Perhaps if the rich man had tended Lazarus's needs and invited him to share a meal with him, he too would have understood the Scriptures and recognised in Lazarus the Lord who had always been a stranger to him.

Amen.