

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

29.09.2019
By Glenn Jordan

Introduction

Just prior to the World economic Forum in Davos last January Oxfam published a report on world economic inequality. In it they presented evidence which demonstrated that the world's twenty-six richest people control more wealth than 3.8 billion of the world's poorest people. Billionaires around the world saw their wealth grow by \$2.5 billion A DAY in 2018, and that one per cent of the accumulated wealth of the world's richest man Jeff Bezos was equivalent to the entire health budget of Ethiopia, a country of 105 million people.

Text

luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried.

In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.” But Abraham said, “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.”

He said, “Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.” Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

Luke's Gospel is a difficult one for those of us living in the First World for so much of his account is a sustained challenge to those of us who, as this story puts it, "during your lifetime have received your good things," (Luke 16:25). Luke aims so much of his Gospel at the economically wealthy and charges us with a responsibility for economic justice in our world.

As the late, lamented Clarence Jordan, farmer, theologian and one of the founders of Habitat for Humanity said it in his characteristic Southern American drawl, "[The bible] doesn't say you *shouldn't* serve God and Mammon; it says you *can't*."

And so here we have yet another story which begins "There was a rich man who..." And this story gives a dramatic account of the negative impact of economic inequality on people who are poor, but also on the rich.

Theologian Ched Myers describes the story of Lazarus as a political cartoon. He says it opens with a portrait of decadent wealth (Luke 16:19) in which the anonymous rich man is clothed in extreme luxury (incidentally a form of luxury repeated in Revelation 18:12 as part of the doomed cargo mourned by the profiteering merchants of burning Babylon). In contrast the poor man is named; he is Lazarus. He sits at the gate of the rich man, as a visible opposition to the conspicuous consumption of the rich man. Lazarus longs to receive charity from the indulgent wastage of this rich man.

Both characters die. It's a matter-of-fact statement, indicating perhaps that wealth is no insulation against the ultimate end. In this we should be reminded of the parable of the wealthy farmer for whom death came suddenly (this parable was the lectionary text for 4 August (to be found <https://www.spiritualityofconflict.com/readings/196/ordinary-18>).

The spatial opposition is reversed in the story, the poor man goes to the bosom of Abraham and the rich man to Hades (Luke 16:22-23). Myers reminds us that this is not simply a crude reversal of fortunes in the next life. Instead, "it is a severe warning that we will *ultimately* become victims of the social barriers we erect if we don't deconstruct them *in this life*."

There is something unsettling here about who really belongs to Abraham's family. This has been a consistent theme of Luke's Gospel (see Luke 3:8; 13:16; 13:28 and even 19:9). Many who *presume* entitlement to a relationship with Abraham will not sit with him in the heavenly banquet.

The rich man imagines that in this afterlife the old social order still holds and he requests Abraham to dispatch Lazarus to bring some water to ease his suffering. Later, when he requests help for his family Abraham refuses saying they have the witness of the Scriptures. But even at the end the rich man defies the biblical witness; how shocking is the statement "No, father Abraham!?" His sense of privilege extends even into the afterlife. Abraham in response makes a startling comment in concluding the story to the effect that the danger of privilege and piety is that it could care less about the clear prophetic witness of justice. We claim commitment to biblical authority, but we chase the spectacular and prefer if someone comes to us "from the dead" (Luke 16:30).

This is a complex and challenging story that Myers believes is actually the key to understanding Luke's message of discipleship. It challenges us, as Myers says "to either 'live against' or 'die with' the inhumane disparities that divide our social

landscape.” It makes us think about the persistence of economic disparities, whose implications last beyond our life here; it challenges us about the place of biblical authority and prophetic witness; about how we crave the spectacular in our walk of discipleship at the expense of the hard labour of doing prophetic justice.

Response

Read the Oxfam report on economic inequality. It’s an obvious question really, but where and who are the rich man and Lazarus today? Where do you see a “great chasm” (Luke 16:26) between peoples and people groups? What does it require of us to act in prophetic witness against such a divide?

Prayer

From “Caesar’s Imprint” in Walter Brueggemann’s “Prayers for a Privileged People”

Deliver us from too much theology
From too many images,
From abstractions that are too rich,
And too much conviction about things spiritual

Give us courage and energy for the issues of
Taxation and poverty and welfare,
And the fleeting chances for justice
and compassion and mercy

Our prayer is in the name of Jesus who
Watched the coins drop into the temple plate,
And wondered about Caesar’s imprint
On our worth

Amen