

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

25.09.2022
By Glenn Jordan

Introduction

This week's entry is a repeated entry from our dearly beloved and much-missed colleague Glenn Jordan. Glenn's primary degrees were in economics, and following a move to Belfast, he continued studies in Theology for the rest of his life. His work was often at the intersection of theology and economics: where what is happening in a community is worthy both of biblical and fiscal analyses and accountabilities. Glenn wrote this in 2019. He died in June 2020.

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In a report on world economic inequality, Oxfam 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.

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## 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."

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## Comment

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 cain'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 in early August](#)).

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 all 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’ of ‘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.

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## Response

[Read the now updated 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?

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## Prayer

Jesus of Nazareth,  
your parable was for a world  
where rich and poor are not separated  
by an impassable gulf.  
As we look at our growing inequality  
may we find the courage  
to make changes in the ways we can  
voting and working for a world  
where those with more power  
make changes too.  
Because the lack of this informed  
and infuriated you. It should inform  
and infuriate us too.  
Amen.

*(written by Pádraig Ó Tuama)*

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## Further Reading

To read Ched Myers on this parable go  
to:

<https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2016/09/22/the-rich-man-and-lazarus-warning-tale-and-interpretive-key-to-luke/>

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Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Exclusion and Prejudice