

## **SERMON: MY REWARD FOR BEING WAS THIS.. LUKE 16:19-31**

### **1. SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE TEXT.**

#### **A. INTRODUCTION**

There was a story in Friday's Post about how the rich of Manhattan are moving from the city to their homes in the Hamptons, other places on Long Island and to New Jersey. They are enrolling their children in exclusive private schools, and abandoning their apartments on Central Park and Fifth Avenue. It was an interesting story and it shows what wealth can do for people. The people I mentioned last Sunday, the shoe shine stand attendant, the UPS truck driver and the coffee service delivery man, can't move to Long Island or New Jersey. They have to stay in the city and in their daily rounds, be reminded of what happened and by inference, wrestle with what it means. To be reminded of the wealthy is an interesting introduction to the text for today.

#### **B. STORIES COMING TO BE.**

One of the things we see in this text, or behind it, is how stories come to be and change. The commentators I turn to in preparing for these sermons all say the same things. This story that Jesus tells, is a story that comes from Egypt. The Egyptian story is about a journey to the kingdom of the dead and ends, according to Jeremias, with these words; "He who has been good on earth, will be blessed in the kingdom of the dead, he who has been evil on earth will suffer in the kingdom of the dead. The story was taken over and altered by the Jews in Alexandria and brought to Israel. It became the story of the poor scholar and the rich publican. We know about the publicans. They were the Jews who worked for the Roman rulers by collecting Roman taxes from their own conquered countrymen. In the Jewish story the scholar dies and no one attends his funeral. The publican dies and has a grand funeral to which many people come. The reason for this state of things is that the publican, at the time of his death was engaged in a good deed; he had planned a great feast for all his wealthy friends, but they refused to attend, so the publican went out and invited all the poor people from the alleys and streets of the town to come to his feast. However, in a dream, another scholar sees the poor scholar in the paradise, refreshed by a stream and fed glorious foods. Also in the dream the publican was seen on the other side of the stream, seeking to cross but failing.

#### **C. THE AUDIENCE**

It is interesting that Luke has shifted his audience for this story. In last week's text about the unjust steward, the audience was the disciples. In this text, in the same chapter, the Pharisees are described as scoffing at Jesus about what he has just been saying to his disciples, and they scoff, Luke tells us, because they loved money. We can certainly see why Luke indicates that the audience for this story is the Pharisees, those who love money.

#### **D. THE CHASM**

I want to touch on just a few interesting points in the text. We are told near the end of the story, when both men have died, that there is a chasm between Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham and the rich man in torment in Hades. Abraham says there is a great gulf set between them so that the rich man cannot come to Abraham and Abraham and Lazarus cannot come to the rich man. In the body of the story itself, we know that there is such a gulf in life on earth. It is the gulf between the rich man in his house and Lazarus, laying on the ground at the gate of the rich man's house. He can see the rich man at his table, eating sumptuously with his friends and would eat the food that fell from the table of the rich man. Lazarus saw the feasting and the fine clothes, and as he lay at the gate, the dogs licking his sores, he longs to be inside the gate so that he could satisfy his hunger. But there was a gulf between himself and the rich man that was more than the gate to the house. It is the gulf that always exists between the rich and the poor, the gulf of social order, dress, habits and life styles, and the gulf is almost as impenetrable as the one between those languishing in Hades and those comforted in the bosom of Abraham.

### **E. MORAL CHARACTER**

We are told nothing of the moral character of either man. We are not told that the rich man is evil, only that he is rich; dressed in purple and fine linen. We are not told of the piety of the poor man. He is not described as the doer of good deeds, or one given to continuous prayer, or one who longs for the coming of the Messiah. Only that he is poor. Jeremias suggests that hearers of the tale might well have thought that the poor man was a sinner, or his forebears were sinners and that he suffered the judgment of God on him in terms of poverty and illness for the sins of the past. One of the interesting points of the story is exactly the fact that there is no discussion of righteousness or evil in the two men, only wealth and poverty. In the Egyptian story it is how good is rewarded and evil is punished in the after life. In the Jewish story it is again about the moral difference between a poor scholar who devotes himself to the study of the Torah and a publican, a person who gained his wealth by collecting Roman taxes from his own countrymen.

But Jesus does not describe moral character. Because he presumes that these things will be known about the two men; that the rich man is evil, that the poor man is good. Not a safe guess, I think.

### **F. REVERSAL**

As I mentioned last week, one of the themes of Jesus about the Kingdom is the reversal of conditions that comes with the Kingdom. In the story the reversal takes place after death. The poor man is comforted in the bosom of Abraham, and has the place of honor at the great feast of the prophets and saints of Israel. The rich man is in torment in Hades and this is compounded by the fact that he can see Abraham and those who rest at the great feast.

The rich man does not seem to learn much from his experience. He asks that Abraham send Lazarus to him so that he might dip his finger in water so that the rich man can ease the torment he is in. He still sees Lazarus as someone around whose only purpose was to

do his bidding and serve his needs. Even when he sees what happens in the Kingdom where justice reigns.

He goes on to ask that Lazarus be sent on another errand. To appear to his brothers who live exactly as the rich man suffering in torment in Hades did, and warn them. Lazarus is to engage in another errand. One wonders what Lazarus himself would have said if he had been asked. Maybe he would have offered to go for the sake of the well being of the brothers. One of the commentaries suggested that the rich man was a Saducee, a group that did not believe in the after life. Did he want Abraham to send L. so that the brothers point of doctrine could be corrected? Or did he desire that Lazarus be sent to his brothers so that their eyes might have been opened and they could change their ways. But Abraham says they have all they need; they have Moses and the prophets and the nature and destiny of human life is already disclosed to them.

I was curious as to why it would be suggested in this story that resurrection would not be a compelling event in addressing people about God's will and the human condition in the light of the gospel of the resurrection of Jesus and that Lazarus namesake in the gospel of John is called forth from his tomb by Jesus.

## **11. WEALTH AND YEARNING TOWARD.**

The whole week, as I prepared for this sermon, I kept thinking about the first sentence of the text, "There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and who feasted sumptuously every day."

### **A. THE FINE AND BEAUTIFUL**

First, the life expressed is something I am drawn to. I suspect we all, at some time, or somewhere within us, are drawn to it. In my life I owned two three piece wool, navy blue pin stripe suits. They were beautiful suits and I loved those suits. I loved them because they looked so good, because they felt so good to the hand and when I wore them, and because, I think, deep down, I believed they suggested something about me to the world, to those who saw me. They made a subtle statement about my status, about my taste, about what I had done with my life. I outgrew those suits. By that I mean I got too heavy for them and have not invested in another one. It is one of the things that America is to the world. It is the fine blue pinstripe suit and what it seems to suggest about life, what is possible in life, about what can be realized in life by individuals and families if released from ancient and ingrained bonds.

A few days after September 11, I watched The News Hour on PBS, and an expert on the Arab world was asked why there are those in that world that hate America enough to do these deeds, and he answered it is not what America has done, but what it is that is hated. What it is is, in its sinews and in all its actions, is a way of living life that threatens the ancient, virtually medieval world of some corners of Islam. I thought, when I heard him say that, that there is no way, if that is what drives those we are calling terrorists, they will win because the advance of science, technology, the centrality of economic interests in social life has so altered the life of those who have found these things at the center of their cultural life, have found life so much healthier, more wealthy, more years added on

to lives, and, even though there is always injustice in every culture, more people share more widely in the wealth that is produced in cultures where science, technology, secular education and economics are at the center. People see that, they will see it and they will be drawn to it.

### **B. THE FINE AND BEAUTIFUL THAT IS OUT THERE.**

When I thought about this man who was clothed in purple and fine linen, about what he was himself thinking when he dressed and when he sat at table with his friends and ate sumptuous meals. I cannot believe that it was just the clothes or the food that was conjured in the mind of the man. I think what is conjured there has something to do with the yearnings and aims of human life. I think that when we gather fine things, when we wear them, and when we use them, when we enjoy good food, that the heart reaches towards that which it imagines is meant for human beings, the large, deep, divine thing that lay on the horizon which is meant for the human heart, for human lives. It is a delicate, fine line that such a man walks when he dons the purple and fine linen. The fine line is that while donning the clothing and feasting on the fine food his gaze should remain on the thing on the horizon, the thing which itself alone can satisfy the longing, that gaze will falter and be drawn to the clothing and the food themselves, and then all is lost.

### **C. THE UNRECOGNIZED WAKE OF OUR LIVES**

I found this quote in a book I am currently reading, The Ecology of Eden by Evan Eisenberg. The quote has to do with the evolutionary history of human beings on the earth described through the eyes of biology. “The genus Homo replaces Australopithecus; modern humans displace Neanderthals; farmers displace hunter-gatherers; civilized people displace or conquer primitive farmers; nomadic pastoralists displace or conquer civilized people; industrial peoples displace, or conquer, or economically subjugate whoever is left.”

### **D. CALLED TO ATTENTION.**

And here we are! The man who was clothed in purple and fine linen became so enamored of his clothes and feasting that he could not see the beggar at the gate. If his eye was kept on the horizon, the view would have included in the foreground the beggar at the gate, he with the sores on his body, his hunger and he might very well have included him in his life in a way that would have enriched his life and the life of the beggar; a way that might have lifted the life of the beggar from its poverty and sickness and despair. But he did not. Most of the time, as expressed in the observation of Eisenberg about the way advancement and change in culture seems to take place, the beggar at the gate, or all the rest of humanity that is not industrial, scientific, economically fixed, get displaced, conquered or subjugated. Sometimes they fight back. Sometimes those who seem the advanced carry within them the flaws that will be expressed in despair, unhappiness, the loss of depth and wisdom, the shortsightedness that consumes the very stuff beneath their feet that is needed for their continued existence.

If the rich man had seen Lazarus, really seen him, perhaps he would have found in his heart the need to repent and his gaze would have been restored, the divine sought in life which was hinted at in the fineness of clothes and food, would have been seen and found.

I cannot help but think that along with the anger, confusion that September 11 have created in us, and the renewal of an awareness of how much our country and culture have meant to us and mean to us, and as much as we find ourselves united behind the goal of the Administration that action must be taken against those who did this thing to thousands of innocent people, and as much as we hope and pray for success in the policies being pursued, as much as we feel and think all these things, we must not forget how it is that we as a culture have made our way through the world, all over the globe, as a culture that has “displaced, conquered or economically subjugated whoever is left”.. and in this have caused pain in peoples, ignored the stress and yearning and sufferings of people, have not heard their cries because they are so far away from us or because we are so busy, or because the noise of our advancement drowns them out. As much as we need to protect ourselves, bring justice to the world for what has happened, we need also to do so with an ancient sadness and humility, we must confess what our advancement has done to peoples of the world, all kinds of people in the world.

Perhaps that is why Jesus told the story. We do not know what life is like on the other side of death. We hope that the evil will be punished and the good rewarded. We hope that those whose common dreams for a fulfilled life, for a realized life, will be met beyond death, especially when there seems to have been so little possibility for it to happen in their lives. But we can hear the stories; we can hear the story of the rich man and Lazarus and perhaps take a look at our lives, the way we live them, the way we think and act towards others, see that being clothed in purple and fine linen ourselves is not all that there is in life.

Amen