

Sermon for the Byron Shire Combined Worship

Uniting Church, Byron Bay

16th Sunday After Pentecost. 1 Timothy 6:6-12; Luke 16:19-31

29 September 2019

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James Janknegt The Rich Man and Lazarus

The *Downton Abbey* fans among you will no doubt have seen, or have tickets to see, the newly released *Downton Abbey* movie.

You might not be a *Downton Abbey* fan: this for me is hard to imagine, coming from a family where $\frac{3}{4}$ of us are such fans.

When I arrived in Brisbane Diocese after returning from many years in the United Kingdom, the first thing the bishop said to me was not, welcome back, how's the new parish going? Or how are you settling in? but "What happens in the next series of *Downton Abbey*?"; "Does Mr Bates get out of jail or does he hang for murder?" (Remembering that the UK was usually one series ahead of Australia as far as episodes of *Downton Abbey* was concerned).

But bishops have their foibles like anyone else!

Like *Upstairs Downstairs* and other similar productions, *Downton Abbey* gives us a glimpse into the disparities between people of different social class: life above and below stairs.

Mr Moseley seeks simple *human* dignity through work

Mrs Hughes seeks the dignity of *choice*, in wanting to choose where her own wedding reception will take place

Anna gives birth in one of the bedrooms: a natural human event in those days except that it took place upstairs in Lady Mary's bedroom, instead of in the servants' quarters

Running behind schedule, Daisy is seen cleaning out the fireplace, when normally she would be unseen, and so is in trouble for being visible, as opposed to invisible

Tom transitions from below stairs to above stairs when he marries Lady Sybil, causing a major family crisis

Lady Edith becomes an unmarried mother but carefully manages to maintain her respectability and status; whereas Ethel Parks, a maid from below stairs, who finds herself in a similar situation, has to give her child away

So access to dignity, choice, rights, independence, respect, justice, power and voice are fundamentally different for these humans, despite the fact that they all live under the one roof.

It's a bit of a microcosm of our world really. We all live as humans on the same planet but we nevertheless have a very different experience of life.

In today's Gospel, we hear of Lazarus, covered in sores, thirsty, hungry, sitting at the Rich Man's gate. But he never receives anything from the rich man, while the rich man eats well and lives comfortably.

Then, in the next life, the Rich Man still treats him like a slave or object: "send Lazarus to dip his finger in the water and cool my tongue"; "send Lazarus to warn my five brothers".

Ignoring Lazarus in this life is one thing, but treating him like a slave in the next life is a breathtaking aspect of this Parable.

Some scholars claim that the aim of the parable is not so much for us to identify with Lazarus, or with the Rich Man (Dives), but with the five brothers. Some claim that in fact the parable should be known not as the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, but as the Parable of the Five Brothers.

They live a life like their Rich brother before them: carefree, selfish, deaf to God's word in Moses and the Prophets, preoccupied with seeking happiness in material things.

An old saying is that the torment of the dead is that they cannot warn the living. The brothers will most likely go the same way as their older brother before them. After all, he can't warn them and their ears are not set to listen anyway.

In his earthly life, Lazarus is someone who has been denied the right to make choices and the opportunity to live a tolerable life. There are millions of Lazaruses in this world today, for whom life is difficult, painful or hazardous. They are deprived of knowledge and communication and robbed of dignity, confidence and self-respect.

When we think about poverty we often focus on the lack of material well-being. But it can also mean the denial of the opportunities and choices most basic to human development. Statistics show that many sections of society, poverty means that leading a long and healthy life is much less likely than for those who do not live in poverty.

For many in our world today, the possibility of a decent standard of living, freedom and dignity is pretty remote.

African Biblical Scholar Paul John Isaak writes that the point of this parable is not to console those like Lazarus with some pipe dream of heaven. It is not meant to console the poor with the hope of recompense beyond the grave. Rather it aims to incite the rich and the poor to hear and act.

The rich man's sin is that he looks at a man with a name, Lazarus, but does not ask him his name. He saw Lazarus' hunger and pain, but did nothing about it. He accepted the poverty of Lazarus as part of the normal order of things and thought it perfectly natural and inevitable that Lazarus should lie in hunger, pain, suffering, sickness and ultimately in death while he wallowed in luxury.

He had failed to see Lazarus as a brother and a neighbour. Relishing his wealth and enjoying the envy it aroused in others, he did not realise until it was too late that a life characterised by individualism and a refusal to share one's bread with one's neighbour is detestable in God's sight (16:20-21).

The Reading from 1 Timothy 6: 6-12 could easily have been written for our society today.

Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷ for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸ but *if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.* ⁹ *But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.* ¹⁰ *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.* But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹² Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

The very same kind of self-indulgence and self-reliance that was the downfall of the Rich Man and his brothers after him are a danger for us as well, in the midst of a self-indulgent and self-reliant society, which thinks it can get by on its own.

Today's Gospel is one of dramatic contrasts and reversals. Not just upstairs/downstairs, but:

Riches/poverty

Heaven/hell

Compassion/indifference

Inclusion/exclusion

What opportunities do you and I have to work against the controlling, selfish, materialistic influences in our world today?

Last time you witnessed someone behaving in a dominating or controlling way did you talk to them about it? Did you say you were disappointed? Or if this was too awkward, did you model a more open and caring approach?

What most absorbs your time, attention and heart? Like Jesus, let's all be examples of an open and inclusive way of life for those around us to see and model.

Lord, you graciously strengthen and replenish all who wait upon you.
Grant us your Holy Spirit, that, by gladly serving others,
we may always be true to Christ,
Our Lord and our Redeemer.
He lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
One God, for ever and ever. Amen.

+Murray