

What Do You See?

Luke 16:19-31

A St Paul's member who works in the city posted the following on Facebook during the week: "I find the homelessness in Melbourne's CBD extremely confronting, which is perhaps why it was bizarrely refreshing this evening to walk past a man who was belligerently eyeballing all the passers-by and holding a sign that said 'I owe my drug dealer a ... load of money'. #truth #realitybites" They do say that honesty is the best policy. I wonder if it worked.

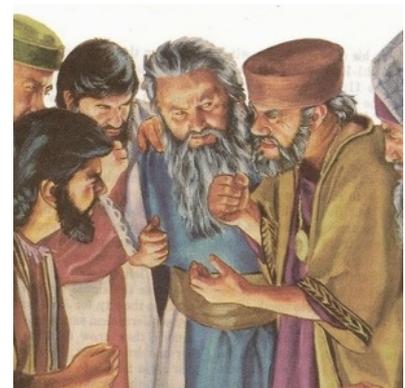


I was in the city recently. I didn't see this man, but I did see other people begging. The people I saw had their heads downcast and our eyes didn't meet. And, if I'm honest, I wasn't looking to really see into their eyes, but to pass by as quickly as I could. We look, but we do we really want to see?

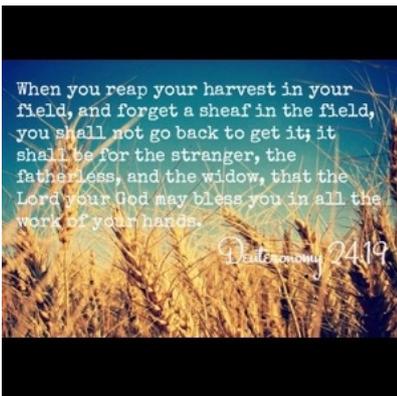
Today Jesus tells what I consider to be his most hard-hitting parable. It's about who we see, and how we act. And our response shows which kingdom shapes our lives: the kingdom of God or the kingdom of self.

Jesus has just told the story of a crooked manager who used dubious methods to dig himself out of a big financial hole. Jesus commended his shrewdness, and urged his disciples to be smart and resourceful in the way that they use the things God has given them. But they shouldn't allow the gift, that is money, to become more important than the giver, which was God. "No slave can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth."

Luke tells us that the Pharisees "loved money", and so their response was to dismiss Jesus' words. They saw money was a sign of God's blessing, and more than that, God's response to their obedience. The book of Deuteronomy does talk of the blessings of homes, crops and goods that God wants to give to his people. But it also stresses that material possessions and blessings are a gift of God. However, if you see your wealth as a reward given to you because you are morally righteous, you will look down your



nose on those who are poor, and you'll say, as the Pharisees did, that their poverty was a sign of God's judgement on them. Hence there was no need to care for the poor, to advocate for their needs, and to lift them out of their state of deprivation.

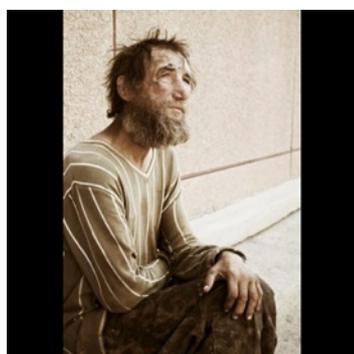


The Pharisees conveniently forgot about the consistent message of the Scriptures to "not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy... Pay them their wages each day... Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice... When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back

to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow.” (Deuteronomy 24) With wealth comes a great responsibility to partner with God in caring for all people, and ensuring the poor receive from the plenty of the rich. It means seeing and acting.

So Jesus tells a parable about seeing what’s right in front of us, and acting in a godly way. It’s also a parable about being seen by God, something we might not be quite so comfortable about.

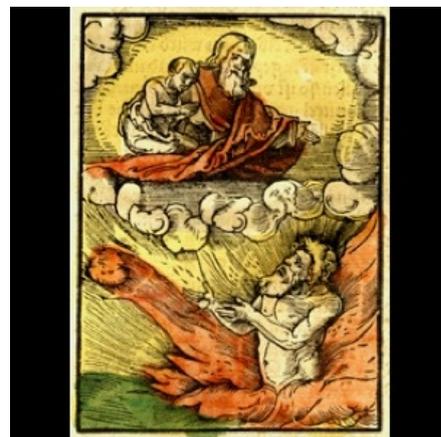
“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.” We don’t know this man’s name, but we do know that he’s had a successful life. He’s dressed in the finest, softest Egyptian linen. And he ate well. Not just occasionally, but continuously... Families and communities got together on special occasions to celebrate with a great feast — most often for a wedding. In the previous chapter the loving father throws a party because his lost son has returned. But this rich man eats this way every day. Worse than that, he doesn’t show hospitality to the community around him. He eats alone, full of self-congratulation. The world has shrunk around him.



But there is a world outside his private universe, just past the front gate. And sitting there is Lazarus. His name means “God has helped.” Is there some irony in this name? How on earth is God helping him? Has not God forsaken him? Lazarus’ life is the inverse of the rich man. We don’t know what he wears, only that he’s covered in sores, and he suffers the indignity of dogs coming and licking his sores. He’s hungry, perpetually. What he would give for some crumbs that fall from the rich man’s banquet. But he has nothing to give. Has the rich man seen him? We will see a little later that he has. But he has not acted.

Lazarus’ life ends, mercifully, and the rich man dies too, and is buried. But this is where the story is turned on its head. Angels transport Lazarus into the presence of Father Abraham. He’s now in place of joy and celebration, the heavenly banquet where the celebration never ends.

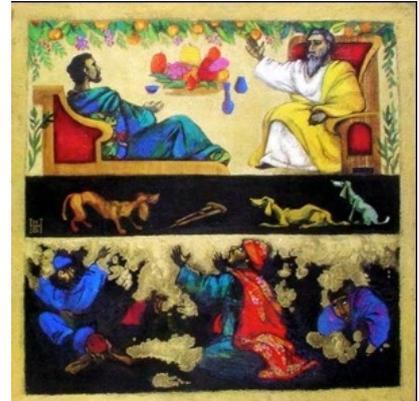
The rich man dies and is alone, isolated in Hades, a place that is everything that his earthly life wasn’t. Now, he sees Lazarus, really sees him, sees that he is having a wonderful time at the heavenly banquet, sitting right next to Father Abraham of all people. Now this disturbs the rich man, because he considers himself a child of Abraham, one of God’s chosen. But he hasn’t been listening to the words from Father Abraham’s God, and because of that disobedience he’s in a very bad place, and now and he needs to engineer a solution to his plight. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus down to him, with some water to cool his tongue. Only now does he pay Lazarus any attention because Lazarus is finally useful to him.



Abraham’s not buying any of this. He speaks tenderly but firmly to the rich man: “Child, remember that during your lifetime that you received good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.” The subtext is this: you were given so many blessings, but you decided that they were reward for effort, rather than a gift from God. You chose to construct a high fence around your life, which you filled to bursting with money and stuff. That fence blinded you to the needs God was calling you to meet out of your abundance. You didn’t

want to see. You wanted to be left alone to enjoy your stuff. You wanted to pick and choose those divine commands you liked, and those you didn't. What does Jesus say earlier in Luke's gospel? "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry."

We may be shocked by these words, but we shouldn't be surprised. It's Mary who sings about God's upside down kingdom as she rejoices in the fact that she is carrying the Son of God in her womb. Her pregnancy is itself a sign of the God who "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly, [who] has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." And of course, this child born to her will embody the kingdom. He sees the hungry and he feeds them; the sick, and he heals them; those possessed by evil spirits, and he releases them; those trapped in addiction to sex and money, and he forgives them. In fact, he announces to all of the people that think that God doesn't care a toss about them that he does see, he does care, and he does act.



And then Jesus pays the price of his life to secure kingdom life for all those who think that God couldn't possibly see them and care for them. As Paul writes in Second Corinthians: "Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." This is the one thing we need. And all the rest — money, home, possessions, experiences — these are sheer gift, not life itself. This is the life he has poured out on us. This is the real life that has transformed our existences, and made us children of our heavenly Father, called to "do good to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share... taking hold of the life that really is life."

So what do we make of this parable? Is Jesus speaking condemnation to us because we are rich in global terms? Well, no, but the question is, "What riches do we trust in, the riches of God's grace or the riches of our wealth?" As Paul writes in today's second reading, it's not money but the love of money which is the root of all kinds of evil. However, the way we choose to use our earthly riches will clearly show what influences us most: the grace of God, or the gracelessness of a selfish life that will not see others and their needs. Do we draw a sharp line around our stuff, and construct a big fence to keep out prying eyes and to hide ourselves from the needs of others, or do we "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness", living generously and securely and trusting God that "all these things will be given to us as well".



One of St Paul's values is that we "witness to and serve people in our local community". And our vision is that we have "an outward focus as we reach out to those in need." What do we see outside the doors of this church, in this growing community? What do you see around your

home, in your neighbourhood, your workplace? God, give us eyes that see, hearts that feel, and hands that act. Amen.