

Trinity 1

I take as my text today from St. Luke's Gospel passage:

And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy Sight, O Lord my Strength and my Redeemer.

Each minister has a favorite sermon or two which they often repeat on a yearly basis. I have several of that nature which I try to freshen up a bit before repeating.

Sometimes, current events lay the foundation for certain sermons, or homilies events that cause us to rethink our humanness. Some events stir up not just fears about our human frailty but, in the case of a pandemic, such as the coronavirus, deeper concern for our individual mortality.

The fear of dying is a human characteristic. It comes with being rational creatures, capable of reasoning, capable of emotions or feelings which only human beings, of all God's creatures, possess.

We are endowed with many emotions, of which, love and fear seem to be the dominant. I would dare that of all our fears, the two greatest are of the unknown and of dying, which are intertwined.

Even at the end of one's life, the human body doesn't succumb easily to the inevitable but continues to struggle for survival, to labor for each breath.

Faced with a threat that exposes our mortality, whether we perceive the threat as exaggerated or overstated, we, more and more, dwell on the question: ***what happens when we die?***

We seek any sign, any hint of that big unknown moment when our body dies, succumbs to its inevitable end.

It is certainly a most perplexing question — *what happens when we die*; one that has fascinated mankind for all his rational existence.

As Christians, we are not without some answers to that question.

Foremost, we firmly believe that the earthly death of our body is not an end; our souls are released, separated, indeed, as some have put it, torn from our bodies, to await, in *Paradise*, the *General Resurrection*.

What we Christians believe is not simply the immortality of the soul, but, as we say in the Creed, *the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting*.

Many who read and contemplate the passage from St. Luke, recounting the story of the rich man and Lazarus, try to interpret the parable in such a way as to infer from it what happens to us when we die.

More to the point, the glimpse we get is of life after death from a Jewish perspective, rather than an introduction to *Eschatology*, or the doctrine of the *Last Things*. These *Last Things* are **Death, Judgment, Hell, and Heaven**, of which there has been little revelation; and we have been left, for the most part, to speculation for what little knowledge we do have. Even the early *Church Fathers* could shed but little light on the subject.

So why the parable of the rich man and Lazarus if it does not foreshadow what happens to us when we die?

Very simply, our Lord was using this story to teach a moral, not to give us a literal description of what awaits us after our earthly demise.

So, let's take a closer look at the parable.

While filled with symbolism, the parable was not intended as a condemnation of wealth or a justification of poverty. The rich man is not condemned because of his wealth, but, rather, because of his callousness and self-gratification. Lazarus was not justified because of his poverty, but, rather, because of his humble and patient character, who, in spite of his pitiful condition, found succor in his service to God.

There is a theme here, and, if we were to consider the Epistle passage from St. John as an introduction to the Gospel passage from St. Luke, we find in it the essence of the Christian revelation that is basic to the moral that Jesus is relating in this parable.

John tells us repeatedly that *God is love*, not in an abstract way but in a way that we can understand: His love is interactive in the world, in us and through us; it is the Holy Spirit dwelling within our hearts; it is the perfecting of our love toward Him and toward others.

Thus, our Lord, in contrasting the two lives of His parable — Dives and Lazarus — we find the extremes of society brought together in terms of love and compassion.

Socially, the rich man was at one extreme, consumed by his wealth and good fortune; not necessarily a monster or oppressor of the poor, nor depicted as being guilty of any glaring sin or vile behavior.

Basically, Dives was a selfish and self-indulgent man who spared none of his fortune for the poor, who was guilty of failing to realize that he was God's trustee for all his wealth and influence, and that he was violating that God-given trust by not using his wealth and influence to the glory of God — not that he had to give it all away to be saved but that he simply did not recognize that his good fortune comes with responsibility.

Clothed in all his finery, in purple and fine linen, Dives represents all those who, consumed by their wealth, forget God and neglect acts of charity and love. Perhaps, he didn't believe in God, for if he had, he might have acted differently; perhaps, in some ways, he symbolized the Pharisees, who were wealthy and viewed as being caught up in their own self-importance.

Most certainly what we can conclude is that Dives lacked love, the love that St. John describes so well as the essence of God and our relationship with Him and our fellow men.

Though we Christians may see the rich man and his end as a warning against self-indulgence in luxury, and a warning against worldliness, selfishness, and unbelief, we Christians should also see a warning of the consequences of not accepting God's love, and letting it guide our lives.

Now, Lazarus, on the other hand, was a poor man and a beggar, representing the opposite extreme from the rich man.

He was covered with sores and was laid at the gate, where the dogs licked his sores. There he lay, desiring only to be fed with crumbs from the rich man's table.

It was not his social condition, nor his poverty and disease that earned Lazarus merit in the sight of God, for we know that even beggars can be vile and filthy at heart; rather, it was his contentment as a son of Abraham, finding solace in God, putting his trust and faith in God, and accepting God's love.

Finally, Lazarus dies and is carried by angels into Abraham's bosom, while the rich man dies and finds himself in hell, a reversal of their earthly situations.

It is noteworthy that Lazarus is not taken up to heaven but to Abraham's bosom, an important point and, for later interpretations of the parable, an essential point. Abraham's bosom was the Jewish name for an intermediate state of bliss, where the souls of the just await the resurrection; while, the rich man finds himself in **Hell**, or **Hades**, a place of torment, the intermediate state for the unjust.

The rabbis placed **Paradise** and the place of torment in sight of each other, allowing for conversation to take place among the dead. So, we find the rich man pleading with Abraham, first for relief for himself, then, finally, for his family yet living; but he is rebuffed. He is reminded of his abuse of wealth, while Lazarus endured his plight with patience and humility.

But, alas, as we are told, a great gulf exists between **Paradise** and **Hades** which cannot be crossed. Dives is without relief; moreover, his request for Lazarus to be sent to his family as a warning is rejected. He is told that Moses and the prophets should be sufficient, re-enforcing our Lord's teaching that there is no power in signs and wonders, and miraculous works, that would, in themselves, produce repentance.

As the parable comes to a close, we are left with several lessons, as well as with even more questions:

First, wealth does not condemn us nor does poverty justify us; it is the choices we make, and how we use what God has entrusted to us;

Second, we cannot serve two masters, that is, the material world and God;

Third, the acceptance of God's love, and allowing it to well up within us by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and to govern our lives, will serve as our justification. We see this quite well in the Epistle passage appointed from St. John.

Yes, we still have those unanswered questions: what happens to us when we die? Do we go to *purgatory*? Do we go to heaven? Where do we go?

It is fairly easy to dispense with the Roman Doctrine of *Purgatory*, as it is rightfully rejected by *Article 22* of the *Articles of Religion* as being without scriptural warrant.

It is a literal interpretation of St. Luke's parable that has lent credence to the Roman doctrine of *Purgatory*, established as dogma by the Roman Church at the *Council of Trent*. That doctrine, essentially, states that upon death, the majority of the faithful enter into an intermediate state for purification of the sins they have committed in this world before they can go on to heaven. According to the Roman Doctrine, a few will escape *Purgatory* altogether and go straight to heaven.

Traditionally, we Anglicans follow the teachings of the early **Church Fathers** which hold that, being imperfect, the just enter *Paradise* upon death, and are at rest in Christ until the general resurrection.

To borrow from the words of **C.B. Moss**:

....they are at rest, in Paradise (the garden); they are in Christ, they are making progress towards perfection, and they are helped by the prayers of their friends on earth, who ask God to give them refreshment, light, and peace.

Paradise is distinguishable from heaven as being the temporary abode of the blessed dead, while heaven is permanent.

Paradise, a state of rest; heaven the state of glory.

Thus, *Paradise* provides a place for the soul to continue to grow in the knowledge and love of God, awaiting the *Last Judgment*, when our souls will be reunited with our bodies, not our physical bodies, but our risen, spiritual bodies. We will be raised up at the last as complete persons.

Still, the lingering question to which we long for an answer: *at the moment of death, what happens to us?*

As *Orthodox Christians*, that is, we who are steeped in the traditions of the **Church**, we cannot find the answer outside of **Scripture** and **Scripture** gives us hardly a glimpse of that moment when the soul departs the body.

Many have speculated. Many have formulated belief systems around these speculations.

Most all of us grasp at straws, dwelling on accounts of people who have undergone near-death experiences, and the accounts given by those who claimed to have died but were brought back to life by a miraculous intervention.

The bright light, the peace and calm they experience, the presence of loved ones and friends, these are some of the straws for which we grasp.

Of one thing we may be assured: that, at the moment of death, we will begin to experience the *Peace of God which passeth all understanding*.

But, the other big question so often asked, what if you aren't a Christian, or maybe a lapsed Christian? Are those people condemned to hell, even if they are good people?

Is there a definitive answer to the *what if you weren't a Christian or were a lapsed Christian?*

Troubling as these questions are, the answers are even more elusive. In **Holy Scripture**, we are told by our Lord that **He is the Way**, and the **Truth**, and the **Light**; that it is through Him only that we have access to the Father.

As Anglicans, well grounded in our **Faith**, adhering to **Orthodoxy**, we do most certainly understand that Jesus Christ is the **Way**. For us, there is no other way.

For those who fall outside the Christian dispensation, we can only rely on God's **Love** and his intention from the beginning, as we understand, that all his Creation be reconciled to him, not to dispute **Holy Scripture** or **Church Doctrine**, for the **Mind of God** is well beyond our human capability to understand, let alone, even imagine.

Our assurance of salvation, of eternal life, is based on **Faith** as revealed to us in **Holy Scripture**.

With the comfort of our Christian belief in what death holds for us, we can accept the details of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus as belonging to the Jewish perspective of that era, while, at the same time, accepting the essential message the parable conveys.

That essential message is that it is not signs and miracles that bring us into the faith of Jesus Christ; it is a way of living, living the love of God, expressed through his Son.

What Jesus Christ is really telling us is that it doesn't matter whether we are rich or poor, high or low, or somewhere in between; wealth doesn't condemn us; poverty doesn't justify us.

Indifference to the misery of others, contempt for the unfortunate, living only for gratification of our own sinful and selfish desires, and failing to make good use of what God has entrusted to us; it is these things which condemn us.

But what will justify us?

If we are to seek *justification*, we must adhere to the two commandments of love that our Lord gave us: to love God, and to love our neighbor.

Like a Sacrament, the love of our neighbor is the outward sign of our love of God, which is an inward, spiritual reality.

Thus, let us forsake self-love and relinquish our self-will to God's will; let us accept His love through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our hearts; and let us offer ourselves as *living sacrifices* to our Heavenly Father; then, when the day comes that we depart this earthly life, we may enter into **Paradise** to be at rest in Christ — alive and well for all of eternity.