

Luke 16: 19-31

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

25.9.16

B,C&H HC

## Living in the light of eternity

*‘Woe to you who are complacent’* – God’s words to Amos for him to proclaim to Israel, which at that time was politically secure and spiritually smug. Great wealth and comfortable life-styles seemed to assure the people of God’s favour towards them. The prophet challenges the people of Israel about their selfishness and indifference to his prophecy of judgement, of being forced into exile, taken captive – but they weren’t really taking it seriously.

In the Gospel reading we heard, Jesus is confronted with a similar situation. He is addressing the Pharisees who also considered their wealth as a sign of God’s approval and were so concerned with their own piety that they did not have concern for others.

You can almost hear Jesus saying to them *‘Woe to you who are complacent’*

But instead, Jesus tells a story...

“There were these two men,” Jesus said. One of them was very wealthy. He dressed in the finest purple clothing, he ate elaborate spreads of food and drink every day, and for him, life was very, very comfortable.

Lazarus, on the other hand, was very, very poor.

(Of all the parables that Jesus told, this is the only time he identifies one of the characters by name, which makes you wonder whether he might be recounting events which really did occur).

Lazarus was very poor, which was why he was lying at the gates of the rich man’s home, hoping that some food scraps would fall off the table

and be brought out for him to eat. He was in a bad state, and the sores on his body attracted the dogs who also hung around there.

Now, you would think, listening to Jesus tell this story, that Lazarus and the rich man had nothing in common. One was comfortable, the other was miserable. One lived in the lap of luxury, while the other lived in the gutter.

So what did they have in common?

Well, they both died and were buried. It didn't matter that one was rich and the other poor, they both died.

Then Jesus describes what happened to them. Lazarus is taken by the angels to be at Abraham's side and the rich man is in torment in hell.

Jesus doesn't explain the reason for their different fates. He leaves us to work it out.

Now the rich man probably wasn't a bad person, not evil or wicked. He probably attended synagogue every week. And he didn't end up in hell because of his wealth. (Abraham was very wealthy too)

The rich man would have walked past Lazarus every day as he went in and out of his house. The sight of this poor beggar at his gate was like a picture asking him to consider his own selfish way of life, in the light of the scriptures, the commandments with which he would have been familiar.

And yet he chose to ignore it.

Jesus is highlighting the man's complacency, selfishness and indifference.

I wonder, what 'pictures' does God put at our door to challenge us about our attitudes and behaviours?

Do we ignore them?

Lazarus, however had nothing in his life, the only hope he could possibly have was to trust in God.

Back to the rich man...

It isn't until he's suffering torment in hell that the rich man really believes in heaven and hell, in judgement. He is experiencing the full reality of it. Up until then, although he may well have been aware of what was written in the scriptures, he had been ignoring it. He had been tied up in living his everyday life of luxury and contentment, not really thinking of the future.

In the same way, (as we heard in our first reading), the people of Israel had been happily living their lives, ignoring Amos's message that if they didn't change their ways, they would be the first to go into captivity and a life of exile – *'woe to you who are complacent'*

The rich man cries out for comfort from his agony *'send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire'*. But Abraham replies that the man has had his reward while on earth. He enjoyed his riches and selfish way of life but now he has died there is nothing left – because of his indifference to God and other people, he hasn't any riches in heaven.

When the rich man realises that his own destiny is a lost cause, for the first time in his life he is concerned for others - *'What about my 5 brothers? They need to know what I now know so they won't have to come here and share in my eternal misery'*. Suddenly, now he is experiencing the desperate reality of hell, he wants people to know the truth about heaven and hell, urgently, before it's too late.

Jesus, in this story, is bringing an urgent message. He wants people to be truly concerned with their eternal destiny. He knows what heaven is

like, he came from there, he has seen it, and he knows what judgement is and what hell is like too! So he gives us a picture of it in this story, to make us sit up and think. We need to face the truth. But are we taking it seriously? Are we just ticking along nicely, getting tied up in our daily living? We sort of believe what we read in the Bible but do we really live as if we do?

Are we just living 'for the moment' or are we living in the light of eternity?

When we die, we will see, just like Lazarus and the rich man, that it really is as Jesus described so vividly.

But, praise God, we can be certain of our destiny. Through Jesus' death and resurrection we are saved from the torment of hell, if we truly believe and trust in him. We can look forward to a wonderful eternity in heaven. We are in a privileged position to persuade ourselves and others of the need to live in the light of eternity.

The rich man became concerned for his 5 brothers who didn't know the truth. Five brothers who were living their lives of luxury, clinging tightly to their possessions, oblivious to the tragic future awaiting them.

We are surrounded by people who choose to ignore the truth about judgement, heaven and hell. People who don't know the truth about God's grace, his message of forgiveness, love and eternal life. They may be people we hardly know, or they may be colleagues, neighbours or close friends and family.

Jesus cares passionately about these people.

Do we care for them enough to share the wonderful hope that we have in Jesus, to share his life-saving message? People need to hear this message before it's too late!

Now I'm the first to admit how difficult I find it to talk about what I believe with people who don't know Jesus, and I don't think I'm alone in that. This is something we've started to think about in the 'Faith Pictures' course we're running at the moment. (Chinley) The aim is to find natural, 'down to earth' ways of sharing our faith and what it means to us, without engaging in complex theological arguments. (Possibility of running the course in Hayfield?)

The question of judgement, heaven and hell also difficult to talk about, we tend to shy away from it. I got involved in a bit of street evangelism, when I visited another church, and one of the questions they were asking people was: 'When you die, are you totally sure, without any doubt that you will go to heaven?' I have to admit, the thought of challenging people like this made me cringe, but it worked! People are really bothered about this.

An encouraging thought though, is that it is God's persuasiveness that brings people to faith in him, not any great expertise on our part. So we can trust in him as we tell the Good News, knowing that he can work through even our feeble efforts, to open people's eyes and hearts. It is God who does the saving, we are just his messengers, sharing what he has done for us.

So let's keep encouraging each other and those who are uncertain, of God's grace as we take seriously the truth about judgement and heaven and hell.

Be inspired by Jesus' compassion and his profound concern for the destiny of all kinds of people. Pray to receive the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.

Let's look beyond death and live our lives in the light of eternity.

Pray:

'Soften my heart, Lord

Soften my heart, Lord

From all indifference set me apart

To feel your compassion

To weep with your tears

Come soften my heart, O Lord

Soften my heart'