Luke 16: 19-31

Some time ago, the newspapers picked up on a verse from the hymn ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’ and made it into a story about how it demonstrated the church’s lack of concern for equality and social justice. The verse that all the fuss was about went as follows:

‘The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them, high or lowly,
And ordered their estate.’

I don’t expect that many of you are familiar with this verse, we’re much more used to singing about purple headed mountains, rivers, flower meadows and such like. What was interesting about the newspaper coverage is that it brought to many people’s attention a verse of a hymn which had long since been dropped because it was realised that it did not reflect prevalent attitudes to poverty, wealth and social justice. It’s only of interest now as a mirror for social history, telling us a little about how some 19th century Christians viewed these issues. Well, as with many newspaper stories, the fuss about the hymn was short lived and soon fizzled out.

Today’s Gospel reading is a parable told by Jesus about a rich man in his castle and a poor man at his gate. A great deal of Jesus’ teaching was through the medium of parables and it is interesting to contrast the way in which this parable speaks about wealth and poverty with the verse of All Things Bright and Beautiful. Unsurprisingly, I guess, the parable as told by Jesus has a timeless quality that speaks to us today just as much as it spoke to the original audience in first century Palestine. The hymn verse seems dated and a product of its time, reflecting a long gone social and moral context that feels irrelevant in today’s society.

I think I feel a ‘however’ coming on at this point. One of the timeless aspects of Jesus’ parables is that they still have the capacity to make the audience feel uncomfortable. This parable is no exception. We don’t have to look very far to see that there is a great deal of poverty around us. So although we might not sing hymns about rich and poor having a God given place we need to think about how far we allow this situation to happen because of our attitudes to wealth and poverty.

One of the distinctive aspects of Luke’s Gospel is his theme of reversal. Usually this reversal is related to status or wealth. Right at the beginning of the Gospel we hear this theme in the wonderful song of Mary, the Magnificat: ‘he has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.’ In today’s Gospel reading, the reversal comes in the afterlife. This would have been a very significant point for Jesus’s original audience, because they are likely to have believed that what happened to you in this life was related to God’s favour. They would have assumed therefore that Lazarus the beggar was experiencing poverty as a sign of God’s displeasure. This makes Lazarus’ post death experience even more surprising, because being carried into the bosom of Abraham was regarded as the place of highest bliss. But there’s a danger here in just stopping at this...
reversal of fortune, where the rich man burns in hell and the beggar is in paradise. Our faith isn’t merely about ‘pie in the sky when you die.’ If it is, then we might as well reinstate the verse of All Things Bright and Beautiful on the basis that it’s ok to ignore poverty because the poor will get their reward when they are dead.

So reversal is only part of the message. That’s the comfortable bit. It doesn’t challenge us to do anything because, as the hymn verse says, God ordered their estate and this presumably applies to ordering consolation after death.

We need to unpick the parable a little more to look at the challenges it presents. The parable splits into three parts.

In part one, we see the situation before the death of the two characters. What is interesting here is how close they are. Lazarus sits at the gates of the rich man’s house. The implication is that every time the rich man goes in and out he will walk past Lazarus. Poverty is not something that happens somewhere else, but it is right on his doorstep. If we think about 21st century Britain and our city of Birmingham, this is very true today. You don’t have to go very far from our affluent suburb of Harborne to see areas of significant poverty and deprivation. The point about the parable is that the rich man must have walked past Lazarus on countless occasions but never actually noticed him. He was indifferent to the poverty that was quite literally on his doorstep. At no point in the story are we told that the rich man was evil, or that he gained his wealth by any dishonest means. In fact we might view him as being generous. In some translations, he is describes as feasting every day, so he might well have invited all his friends over for a good meal. But the point is that he probably only asked people who were equally rich as him, so his generosity was given to those that already had a great deal. I wonder if his friends noticed Lazarus as they walked through the gate?

In part two, we see the reversal after death. What is interesting here is that the rich man’s attitude to Lazarus hasn’t changed. He still sees him as inferior, asking that he should come and cool his tongue. As far as he is concerned the beggar is still only fit to do his bidding.

Finally in part three, the rich man asks for a warning to be sent to his family and is told very firmly that his family has Moses and the prophets to tell them how to behave, so there is no need to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn them.

There are two points that I think are important to draw out of the parable. The first is that it’s not wealth that is the problem but indifference. Wealth can be a force for change but it can also be an insulator. The worrying aspect of how we tackle poverty globally, nationally or locally is that we lapse into indifference, or we think that it someone else’s problem. Having a benefit system is a sign of a society that does have regard for the needs of the vulnerable, but it doesn’t necessarily mean that it will eradicate poverty or need. It tempts us, though, to think that no-one can be really poor because they can receive benefit, so there is always a safety net. But not everyone accesses this net. So, for example, homeless charities estimate that up to 6,000 people sleep rough in a year.

The second point is about making sure that compassion, rather than indifference, is valued and promoted. The last part of the parable gives us a little clue about how this might happen, via learning from our faith. Love is the heart of the
Christian message. In contrast, indifference is not part of that message. Today we are especially aware of that message, since we are welcoming two members to our Church family, Isobel and Joseph. This morning their parents and Godparents will promise on their behalf to support them in their journey of faith that starts with their baptism. What will Isobel and Joseph learn about that faith and how it is played out in our everyday life? Well, the core of what they will learn, we hope, is that God’s unconditional love for us is reflected in our compassion for others. In turn this leads to some form of action, some steps to make a difference.

Wealth isn’t a problem, it’s our attitude to it and to the needs of others that can cause difficulties. To quote John Wesley: ‘When I have money, I get rid of it quickly, lest it find a way into my heart.’ Amen

Dr Jane Yeomans – Lay Reader
29 September 2013