

dives & lazarus
a sermon preached on the
nineteenth sunday after pentecost
25 September 2016
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by the revd dr brian porter

the lections: Amos 6. 1a, 4-7; Psalm 146; 1 Timothy 6. 6-19; Luke 16. 19-31

The Parables of Jesus are about **US**. Today the rich man and the beggar man represent us: we are each of us in varying degree the two chief characters in this famous parable of Jesus. I am **Dives** living with you in prosperous Camberwell, and so are you. But I am also **Lazarus**, poor in the living out of a life which should reflect my calling as a disciple of Jesus. You might be able to confess as I do that you sometimes do things which begger you especially when you do not do what your Christian faith calls you to do. Your own conscience, if it is lively, will make plain to you those things of which you should be truly ashamed. Are there any?

Let's begin with some exegesis:

Firstly the *dramatis personae*: the main characters in the drama.

Dives is a name derived from the Latin and means simply a rich man who actually remains nameless. He is stereotypical so this representation in Christian art is also stereotypical: *Wikipedia* has a rich collection of paintings from a rainbow collection of international Christian art in major galleries of the world including our own National Galleries in Melbourne and Canberra. "Dives" is usually depicted as seated in a sumptuous royal setting, in a marble palace festooned with silken tapestries, dressed in fine purple silks - purple was a royal colour - and waited upon by slave courtiers serving lavish and exotic dishes on golden platters and goblets of the finest Mediterranean wines. His garments are of fine linen and his radiant skin looks perfumed and pomaded.

It would not be difficult to modernise the setting to suit the lavish and rather ostentatious lifestyle of the Western world's *glitterati* as depicted these days in the thick glossy newspaper supplements advertising evening gowns or Gucci fashions or \$10 000 watches or Maseratis. Then when ogling the Real Estate colour supplements such as *The Melbourne Weekly* delivered to us, or which we might flick through in the doctor's waiting room, these pictures contrast severely with news film footage of bombed streets in Aleppo: or vast tent communities in the deserts of Sudan. These war-devastated people - the refugees of Aleppo and Nauru closer to home, to stir our Christian consciences to give generously to the many appeals for compassion and generosity which come our way. We represent **Dives**, they represent **Lazarus**.

Lazarus in the ancient world represented outcast homeless lepers. Mother Teresa of Calcutta - proclaimed **St Teresa** by Pope Francis ten days ago spoke of *the poorest of the poor* as she went about her work which began in Calcutta when she went out each morning into the slums and shanty towns with her small handcart picking up those who had died the night before in order that she might bathe and feed them in the hope that as they died they might do so within sight of a loving human face. In time she gathered about her communities of white-robed sisters. Later she dedicated her Nobel Prize to founding houses in many parts of the world. When I was a priest in the City of Sydney 40 years ago I thought it a judgement on us as well-off Australians that Mother Teresa had founded one of her houses in the Redfern

slums and another at Dubbo in outback NSW. Guilt is the handmaiden of compassion is it not?

The author of Luke has **Lazarus**, a diseased beggar, crippled and lying at **Dives'** gate: scrofulous, full of sores licked by dogs, and starving. **Lazarus** longs merely to catch a few crumbs which might fall from the cornucopia of the banquet inside. In our sad modern world, refugees number hundreds of millions - sixty million worldwide on some UN estimates – and the problem is growing in our war-racked world. When I was a schoolboy I read Bertrand Russell's *Has Man a Future?* The same question is still before us all in our tortured world overhung by nuclear proliferation I was horrified the other day to hear Mr Trump's answer to a question put to him: "Mr Trump what's your response to nuclear weapons?" His chilling reply was: "We've got them so we might as well use them!"

One day Jesus said, both men, **Dives** and **Lazarus** would die. Death is the great equaliser as we all know. **Lazarus**, in Jesus' account was carried away by the angel of death and occupied the seat of honour at Abraham's right hand in the heavenly places. Jesus says nothing about Dives' fate except that he was buried and his soul despatched to Hades. Then the narrative becomes more poignant as a parable common in the ancient world of the reversal of fortune so that Dives down there is in torment just as Lazarus once had been at the rich potentate's gate. The erstwhile rich man now pleads to Abraham: "Send Lazarus down here to help relieve my suffering". The answer of Abraham in heaven is brutal; in summary he says: "During your life on earth you received good things. You could have chosen to share them but you chose not to. Lazarus' life was harsh, but now God has chosen to bring him comfort. The gulf between heaven and hell is wide. There is no passing between the two: no more comfort for you forever." This is the origin of the Catholic teaching on Purgatory, an imaginary state of probation with opportunity to make sorrowful amendment before admission to the heavenlies.

So then, in this perspective you and I are also Lazarus who says as does the poet Gerard Manly Hopkins: "*Bitter would have me taste: my taste is me*". Each of us I feel sure, have moments when we loathe ourselves. Even though we are rich and comfortable by worldly standards, we are also haunted by guilt that the good we know, we do not do and vice versa, so we sin and sin and sin. We can be so guilty of guilt that we are bound down by our own awfulness and, as I say, guilty of guilt. Christianity truly is a religion of rescue.

I have already mentioned St Teresa whom I saw in Sydney forty years ago visiting her hospice in Sydney in the slums of Redfern. Another unproclaimed saint is the Australian, Dr Catherine Hamlin whom I met here in Australia a few years ago. She had a privileged upbringing at a prestigious girls' school before doing Medicine at Sydney University where she trained in obstetrics and gynaecology. She and her doctor husband ended up in East Africa where for thirty years she worked in women's hospitals restoring the fistulas of young pre-pubescent girls and young women whose capacity to bear children was damaged by pregnancies when they were too young for child-bearing. In her decades of work in East Africa Dr Hamlin moved thousands of women from a hellish incontinent existence to a healthy child-bearing life of motherhood. When they were well, she trained them as nurses and employed them in the string of hospitals she went on to found.

One more relevant experience: more than a century ago, a brilliant German organist heard this parable of Jesus in church and felt convicted. "**I am Dives**" he thought. Professionally by worldly standards he was already an accomplished scholar, a theologian and a world class New Testament scholar who wrote a famous book which is still studied today: *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. He was so converted by the teaching of Jesus that he became a missionary doctor in the Congo. But before he went out to West Africa he studied Medicine and Music and earned two more doctorates in these areas. So outstanding was he as an organist, a world authority on Bach and Widor, that embarking on a thirty year life of running a jungle

hospital, he returned every few years to Europe to offer world class organ recitals to earn money for the running of his jungle hospital. This man was of course Dr Albert Schweitzer, a 1952 Nobel prize winner. He died at the age of 90 in his jungle hospital at Lambarene in Gabon.

Thus this famous parable of Jesus which inspired St Teresa, Dr Catherine Hamlin and Albert Schweitzer has been enormously influential in the 20th century history of missionary outreach.

Of course there are many unanswerable paradoxes and manifest unfairnesses in life and most of us have a share of these.

What are some of these which you have had or are experiencing – illnesses and marriage breakdowns or relationship disappointments...

On the other hand we are all showered with blessings. Think of yours for which you are eternally grateful...

What absorbs most of your time, your attention?....

What is your heart's desire?...

What are your longings?...

St Augustine prompted deep thought with his classical utterance:

“All our life is to be exercised in longing and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you”.

The novelist Iris Murdoch reminds us that: “If we long and long to be with someone, then we love them”. Think of and pray for your loved ones ...

When old Archbishop Frank Woods was on his deathbed, I asked him what he longed for most, and his reply was - unsurprisingly - in the words of Scripture: “to be with Christ which is far better.” Then his eyes opened wide and sparkled as he reassured me: “My bags are packed!”

Let us pray:

Lord increase our hunger for you and our way of finding fulfilment.

Make us rich in the things of heaven and give us generous hearts towards the innumerable Lazaruses in our troubled and war-weary world that we may freely share with them some of the treasures with which you have endowed us as modern Dives. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen

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