

Dives and Lazarus

A sermon preached at Summertown United Reformed Church on Sunday 29th September 2013 by Rev'd Dr Mark Butchers

Luke 16, vv. 19-31

Today's Gospel (Luke 16.19-31) is the story of the rich man (often referred to as Dives, the Latin for 'wealthy') and Lazarus the poor beggar. It's based on a Jewish folk-tale, hence the references to Abraham, Moses and the prophets, which is unusual in Luke's Gospel.

On the face of it, it has a simple interpretation: if you are rich now, you will suffer in the next life. If you are poor now, you will be rewarded later. Perhaps this was the meaning of the original folk-tale. If so, it is not good for us in the wealthier western nations. We would go into torment; the poor people of Sudan, India and so on would go to heaven. Happily for us, the original folktale is overlaid with a more subtle and complicated story which suggests a more nuanced meaning. To get to the heart of it, let's look at the relationship between Dives and Lazarus.

It is important to recognise that Dives doesn't just overlook Lazarus at his gates; he deliberately ignores him. I used to think that Dives' love of luxury, rich clothes and fine dining had blinded him to the man sitting in poverty at the bottom of his drive. But then I realized there was more to it than that. When Dives is suffering in Hades, he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue. Not only is Dives aware of the existence of the poor man at his gates; he even knows his name. He didn't overlook Lazarus on earth; he saw him only too clearly. He knew who he was, he could see his condition. Yet he ignored him.

After both their deaths this changes. Dives no longer ignores Lazarus. That may seem like an improvement, but it's not. It would be if Dives acknowledged Lazarus to apologise to him, but he doesn't. Rather he sees that Lazarus can be useful to him – to cool his tongue. He sees him not as a fellow human-being, but as a servant with his uses. So the reason he acknowledges Lazarus' existence is purely selfish. It arises out of the same self-centredness that led him to ignore Lazarus on earth.

Nor does Dives give any hint of repentance. He never says he treated Lazarus badly; in fact quite the opposite – he tries to make excuses for himself. "Send Lazarus to warn my brothers about Hades," he says. The implication is: if only someone had warned me, I'd have lived a better life. But Abraham replies: you had all the warnings you needed; you just didn't listen. So after death, Dives is just as self-centred and arrogant; and he's still making excuses, no doubt just as he made excuses for not helping Lazarus on earth.

This is where we get to the heart of the story. It says to me that death does not miraculously change our characters. Rather what we do on earth – the way we treat other people, how we think and act – shapes the sort of character we develop. And the sort of character we develop determines what happens to us after death. I don't mean by that the scales of judgement. I don't mean that all our good deeds are put on one side of the scales and all our bad deeds on the other – and depending which way they tip, we go to heaven with Lazarus or to Hades with Dives. That's as crude a picture as the rich automatically being punished and the poor rewarded.

Rather, the sort of character we have developed on earth will influence how we respond to God at death. Who we have become deep inside will determine how open or closed we are to him and to all he wants to give us.

If we are arrogant now, we are likely to be arrogant in death. We'll still be making excuses for ourselves just like now. We'll find it difficult to admit our mistakes and hence to receive the forgiveness God will be longing to give us.

If we have no compassion for people now, if we have hard hearts, we may have no feeling for God: his love may well seem suspicious and we may be unable to accept his love for what it is or love him back.

If we are inward-looking and selfish now, we are likely to be the same in death, unable perhaps even to see God, so blinded by our own inwardness will we be.

This I feel is what this story is about, and what judgement at death is about. God's love and forgiveness and warm embrace is there for each and every one of us. He waits, he longs to offer it all to us. All we're asked to do is to receive it, accept it, embrace him back. We're not expected to be perfect, we don't have to pass an exam or reach a certain standard. All we have to do is want it.

That's all we need to do in death – to want God's love. And then it will shower upon us in abundance, forgiving us our mistakes, shaping and honing us into the perfection of ourselves, with a tender care beyond our imagining. There may well be tough bits, I'm sure, as he faces us with the things we have done wrong, and the hurts we have caused, as we all have. But that will be done in the context of a love that never lets us go, never lets us down. And with sorrow from us, we will work through that to healing and wholeness.

Poor old Dives had become so selfish and so arrogant that I suspect he couldn't even want God's love – he didn't know what wanting God's love meant. And so he ended up cutting himself off from God – his own hell.

So what does this mean in practical terms for us here and now. I sometimes wonder why, when God created the universe, he didn't cut to the chase and simply make a spiritual heaven with creatures who could love him perfectly for all eternity. I think the answer is that he doesn't want rather unreal, rather plastic, identi-kit creatures. He wants real beings with variety and difference and uniqueness. And hence he creates this physical universe in which such creatures can emerge over billions of years of evolution and then develop into you and me, with unique gifts, talents and characters.

I remember Canon John Fenton preaching at St Peter's once. He said: "you know, God is rather like a stamp collector." There was a pause whilst we wondered what on earth he meant. He continued: "the thing about stamp collectors is that they particularly like the stamps which have little quirks and oddities about them. They prize uniqueness. And it's the same with God and us. He delights in our quirks and oddities, the particular characters which make each of us who we are."

This good earth is our training ground, where we grow and develop into unique individuals. We're not all growing into identi-kit creatures. We're growing into ourselves. We can do that

in positive directions guided by Christ's example and the prods and prompts of the Holy Spirit. But equally, if we so choose, we can develop in selfish, arrogant, me-first ways, bowing to the baser instincts which are there within us. Our calling as Christians is to resist that and allow God to develop in us positive Christ-like characters – not just for our own benefit but as a witness and example to others.

One key way we do that, I think, is by trying to be sensitive to the Lazaruses at our gates. That may be those who are homeless or people on the breadline because of the current recession. It may be people in this city, in this country. But these days our gates open onto a much wider world thanks to television, the internet, and air travel. We cannot but be at least dimly aware of the needs of people struggling for survival in so many parts of Africa and currently in and around Syria.

Dives chose one way to handle Lazarus. He noticed, but ignored him and refused to get involved. He closed himself off to the potential riches of that encounter in favour of an inward focus on his own needs. We saw where that led him both in terms of character and fate. It's all too easy for us to do the same - to sweep past on our way to something far more urgent, far more important, sometimes to very worthy church-based things; to avoid getting involved for a myriad of different reasons. I know that all too well in myself. But it has consequences for who I am becoming. I am the poorer. I'm more closed in on myself. I am less open to others and to God.

And by contrast we have the example of Jesus, not just noticing people, but seeing deep into their hearts, taking time to know them by name and to understand them. We see that in the story of Zacchaeus the tax collector (Luke 19.1-10). He was hardly a poor beggar, with dogs licking his sores. He had no lack of physical comforts. But on the inside, deep in his soul, he was incredibly impoverished and begging for something more. Jesus took the time and trouble to see that and to do something about it. He did not just sweep past.

And that is the challenge for us: to look, to notice, to learn more and understand, to engage as best we can. We can't do it always and everywhere, but we can do it sometimes and somewhere, and probably more often than we think. And when we do, we will be enriched, we will discover Jesus at our side