

## **Sunday 28 September – Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity**

### **Sermon by Liz Barnes**

*An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)*

The story of Lazarus is a predictable story – right up to the end. The context makes it predictable; it comes in Luke's Gospel, the one which most likes to remind us of God's great love for the poor. From before Jesus's birth, Luke puts God's care for the unwanted before us. Mary visits Elizabeth her cousin during her pregnancy and she sings the song which we now know as the "Magnificat," which includes the words, 'God has brought down rulers from their thrones, has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.' With those words we are set for a Gospel which carries the theme of what could be called 'the great reversal.' Luke constantly reminds us, just because a person is successful in the world does not mean they are successful in the Kingdom. Jesus the Son of God becomes a poor travelling preacher, beloved of the poor and hated by the powerful. The poor are told that they are blessed and the rich warned that they already have all that they will receive.

From the opening sentence you know that the reversal will happen. We have a rich man, living in luxury, and we have Lazarus. They are set close together. Lazarus lives at the rich man's gate; in other words, he is within easy access, and the implication is clearly that the rich man could have done something about his hunger. But he does not; he lives in luxury and ignores the agony of others. However, the great reversal has already begun in the description of them. Lazarus is named and the rich man is not. In scripture, just as in society today, the expectation is that if someone is important you will know their name. Lazarus had the distinction of being the only person in any of Jesus' parables to be given a name, and it means 'God helps.' In other words, even Lazarus's name points us to what is to come. No one who has read Luke's Gospel so far could doubt that by the end of the story Lazarus will be shown to be close to God's heart, and the rich man who is so careless about the needs of others will find himself brought down from his throne.

And so, it happens both men die. Lazarus is carried to Abraham's side. In death, this obscure poor man stands next to the greatest of the Old Testament saints. Rich man is buried and finds himself in hell.

This story of these two men appears as part of a collection of related sayings concerning faithfulness, wealth, and poverty. Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees; hypocrisy and self-righteousness is linked to the generalised charge of 'love of money' described in our passage from 1 Timothy as "root of all kinds of evil". The rich man has in his lifetime those things which are often prized by human beings; he has wealth and status, dresses in purple and fine linen, feasting sumptuously every day but they avail him nothing after his death, for he can take none of it with him. Lazarus by contrast is invisible: those coming and going to feast with the rich man simply do not see him, or, if they see him, do not pause to regard him.

What criteria do we use to judge people? To whose voices do we – individuals, the Church, society at large- think we need to listen?

The writer to the Hebrews, referencing the visit of Abraham at the oaks of Mamre, underlines the importance of exercising hospitality to strangers, "for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it."

Lazarus, denied any hospitality or notice, is now carried by angels to be with Abraham. Ultimately, the challenge posed by this parable is the same as the one posed in that of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, as they each ask, "Lord, when did we see you...?" Of course they would have brought food, clothing, and a cup of water to the rich man had he asked it; and yet, they did not see Lazarus lying at the gate.

Today's readings call us to radical readjustment of our perspectives: to set aside that which is prized by human beings and to hope not in ourselves, our possessions, or our achievements – all uncertain things- "but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" They are a challenge to open our eyes to see Lazarus at whichever gate or border post or social group he may be lying outside, unseen and disregarded; they are a challenge to listen to Moses, the prophets, and to Christ who has already risen from the dead; they are thus an invitation to "take hold of the life that really is life" (1 Timothy 6:19)

The rich man in this parable is punished not because he happens to be wealthy but because he refused to see Lazarus at his very doorstep. He had

the means to alleviate his hunger and to comfort him in his suffering, but he did not.

What does this tell us about faith? I think it tells us what God really values. It is not necessarily the person whose faith is always deep and sure. It is the person who sees what the scriptures say, who reads the story of God's compassion for the poor and weak and who changes their life because of it. We may wish that we had a faith deep enough to move mountains, but I suspect God wishes that we had faith deep enough to hear what God says and do it. If within our faith we have loved someone a little more, become more sceptical about the value of riches, or given to others, then we have the kind of faith that God values.

And never forget. Not long after Jesus told this parable he was killed and rose again and most of the world ignored him.

Amen