

Bennochy church: 26th February 2017

The bible raises a lot of issues that are easier just to ignore or set aside. Let's not talk about them. One of them is about the afterlife. How would you describe heaven and hell. What is your mental image of the place that exists after death. If I gave you a piece of paper, what would you draw? Let me read to you a passage from the book *We make the road by walking* by Brian McLaren,

*"Jesus was boring, if you go by the tame and uninteresting caricature many of us were given. He was a quiet, gentle, excessively nice, somewhat fragile man on whose lap children liked to sit. He walked around in flowing robes in pastel colours, never dirty, always freshly washed and pressed. He liked to hold a small sheep in one arm and raise the other as if hailing a taxi. The real Jesus was far more complex and interesting than any of these caricatures. And nowhere was he more defiant, subversive, courageous and creative than when he took the language of fire and brimstone from his greatest critics and used it for a very different purpose." (p. 135)*

One of the images of the great preachers of the past, were sermons based on God's judgement, fire and brimstone, with a good thumping of the pulpit lectern thrown in for good measure! In booming voices, echoing through the sanctuary, 'after life, where are you going!'

The story of the rich man and Lazarus (means "God is his help"), it is just a story, gives us an insight into such thinking. Here is one mental image of afterlife and in the story, we get an insight into the thinking of Jesus. Let me begin by saying this, I am not comfortable with the idea of such a clear distinction, between those accepted and those rejected by God. That is in this story, but I wonder if the point being made by Jesus is broader than that. I believe this story has to sit alongside the character of God, that I think is more about love than judgement.

What are the greatest commandments as expressed by Jesus? What sums up the law of God? *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind"* and love your neighbour as you love yourself.

Nineveh was not even in Israel. That was part of Jonah's problem. How could God express love for a city that was not part of his chosen people. That radical theological statement is far more important than Jonah's mode of transport inside a large fish. Forget the fish and instead focus on the actions of God. His love was broader than just the special covenant relationship between God and Israel. That was the radical message of this ancient story. Who is accepted by God?

I don't know if Luke have a bit of a bee in his bonnet about wealth, but remember the rich young ruler who went away sad, because at that moment, in spite of obeying all the laws of God, he could not give away what Jesus asked, and Zacchaeus, whose life was turned around after his encounter with Jesus. To get a

better perspective in life, climb a tree! We don't know if the rich young man ever turned his life around, but what we do know is, the rich man of Luke 16, did not.

I think the key word in this story is opportunity. This extremely rich man had the opportunity to help Lazarus the beggar, not once, but it seems every day. In effect he allows Lazarus to starve to death! Did he feel no sense of compassion for another human being? Lazarus sits in the streets of Kirkcaldy. In homeless shelters and in scatter flats. The opportunity is always there. We know that poverty is both visible and invisible. The rich man had no excuse, Lazarus was visible, there in front of him, everyday. Willie Barclay sums it up like this, "*the sin of Dives was not that he did wrong things, but that he did nothing.*"

Now comes the mental picture and it is a traditional Jewish one of separation. Some are in comfort and some are in pain. What is interesting in this story, is the two men can see each other. Not only do you not have it, you can see someone else who has what you want. This is mental torture.

The image is certainly one to challenge our thinking. I personally don't believe that God acts like that, but it is hard hitting. Listen to the words of Jesus. He says to the rich man, You could have helped. It is too late now. Your opportunity has gone. And as for your brothers, well they have the words of the prophets to guide them as to how they should live.

What comes to mind is this, to those who are given, much will be expected. It is about the responsibility of wealth and the capacity to share it. It is not about being Bill Gates. Wealth is an attitude of mind, as much as it is money in the bank. To the Lazarus in the streets, we are the wealthy.

In desperation the rich man seeks the miracle of resurrection to convince his brothers to change and so avoid his fate. How ironic, the name of the name raised by Jesus, the brother of Martha and Mary? Remember, it was Lazarus. Miracles in themselves do not create faith. For the rich man, this was a forlorn hope. Even Christ's own resurrection, would demand faith in a body that you would not be able to touch.

I believe God asks a lot of us in life. That is the point of the story. It is about our opportunity and our responsibility. The rest is up to God and is beyond our understanding. Christian Aid believes in life before death, so does God. The world is full of people called Lazarus. Made in the image of God and loved by God. The only thing we can control, is what we do with the opportunities given to us in life, and that we use the responsibility given to us by God, and we use it wisely.

The bible tells us that 'perfect love drives out all fear' (1 John 4: 18) Let us live, not in fear of some judgement to come, let us instead, take God's love in us, to love the stranger, the enemy and even Lazarus. Amen.