



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Sunday, June 7th, 2015 – Trinity I

“And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.”

**✠ In the Name of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN ✠**

This passage from the Gospel of Saint Luke is very disquieting for us, as well it should be - it paints a picture of hell. Not only that, it reminds us of how easily one might find oneself consigned to a room there. Indeed, it's certainly easy for us to imagine some of history's real-life monsters like Adolph Hitler having a bunk in Hell, and although we are told God desires not the death of a single sinner, it's also easy to understand why people take comfort in that idea - a bad place for the “bad” people, and a good place for the “good” people.

In fact, this lines up so well with what we already believe and *want to* believe, that we've gone to considerable length to build up our own erroneous doctrines around it. It's no mystery that people who don't believe in God in the first place make no claim to any belief in Heaven or Hell; and while they are certainly mistaken, that's at least consistent with their beliefs and cosmology. But the fact is, it's also not uncommon to hear a plainly stated disbelief in the devil or in Hell on the part of church-going Christians. This is a curious thing, as Jesus repeatedly confirms the existence of Satan. Likewise, Jesus is now speaking of a place of great torments for those who willingly live a life separated from God and His will. Granted, it's a parable and thus shaky

ground for developing any sort of dogmatic view of the workings of Hell, but it's certainly sufficient to establish the reality of such a place. So if we believe Jesus when He says comforting things such as “your sins are forgiven” or “I go to prepare a place for you,” then it's just as important we believe Him when He says disquieting things that affirm the unpleasantness of life in this world and the next.

And even when we do recognize the reality of these things, you'll often hear a very unsound theology surrounding them, namely the idea that “good people go here, bad people go there.” And the fact is, it's reasonable to think the rich man here thought himself a fairly good person; after all, he at least allowed this poor beggar to sit outside his gates without chasing him off, and he might have tossed him a crust of bread which *surely* the filthy beggar hadn't earned. That's good, or at least good *enough*, right?

So what was the rich man's sin? This parable isn't a call to arms for class war, as there's nothing inherently evil about having a few extra quid in the bank, and there's nothing inherently virtuous about being poor, so that can't be it. The rich man's sin was his failure to really *see* Lazarus. Sure, he saw him when he walked

by him on his way into town to get some tea, and he may have seen him when he looked out the window, but he didn't see his brother, a fellow child of God; he saw through him or around him or past him, but he didn't see Lazarus the man, somebody worthy of his love, kindness, and charity. And this man was certainly in a position to help Lazarus out of his unfortunate station in life - Jesus says he was clothed in purple, which was a very expensive colour in that time, and fine linen. He fared sumptuously every day, and his home was apparently palatial enough to have its own gates.

Lazarus, conversely was homeless, and covered in sores. His greatest hope for a bite to eat was to have the scraps that were left over from the other man's meals. Just as bad, Jesus says that dogs came and licked his sores. Let's be clear on that - these weren't adorable Saint Bernards with barrels around their necks, coming to comfort somebody; these were vicious, feral animals. Worse, they were considered an unclean animal to the Jews of the time, meaning that in licking Lazarus' wounds, they also left him in a state of ceremonial and spiritual uncleanness. So the rich man wasn't just leaving Lazarus to be hungry and in pain, he was leaving him to be made repeatedly unclean, which was far more upsetting for any religious Jew than mere hunger pangs; Lazarus was left with religious pangs as well.

Even at the time of their mortal death, the rich man fares better in the corporeal sense than Lazarus. Jesus makes it a point to say that the rich man was buried, something which was important to the Jews and a sign of being of good estate, while He merely says that Lazarus died; we can assume nothing of honor was done with his body. And in a sense, it's nice that the rich man got his last bit of honor and ceremony, because this is where his good fortune ends. Jesus tells us that Lazarus is taken to Abraham's bosom; this is not a destination, rather a literal saying that the righteous Jews went to be with Father Abraham, to be held and comforted by the great patriarch of the Jewish people. Just as we see the painting of the

disciple whom Jesus loved resting his head on His bosom, we can picture Lazarus likewise being comforted. This is his reward.

The rich man likewise gets his reward, and winds up in a state of affairs far worse than those of Lazarus whom he ignored on earth; he is in a place of torment, from which there is no escape. Even still, he fails to see that things have changed, because he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his tongue. Note that he doesn't condescend to actually speak to Lazarus directly; no, he speaks past Lazarus to Abraham and asks Abraham to *send Lazarus*, as though the rich man were still a rich man, and Lazarus were his errand boy.

Yet Abraham spares Lazarus the indignation of the moment and tells the rich man "*son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.*" Lazarus suffered silently, with as much dignity or piety as he could muster; we aren't told that he complained or bewailed his station in life, and he now has his reward. The rich man blatantly ignored the sufferings of his neighbor, and likewise has his.

The rich man still doesn't grasp that his and Lazarus' stations in life (or the afterlife as it were) have switched places, and implores Abraham to *send Lazarus* to his brothers to warn them; it seems that in his arrogance borne of his earthly estate, he feels entitled to have Lazarus leave the comfort of Abraham to go do a task for him. Indeed Lazarus, whose life was one of misery and suffering, is expected to leave a place of freedom and peace and return to this plane to do the rich man's bidding. Abraham offers another rebuff, telling the rich man that his brothers already have Moses and the prophets to warn them. When the rich man suggests that if one were to rise from the dead he would be heard, Abraham again says no, telling him "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."

It is of course a grand understatement to say this if a bit of foreshadowing on Jesus's part; He knows that the culmination of His work here is to suffer horribly, and to wind up with his own sores inflicted by the Romans and wounds caused by His crucifixion. And He knows that He is going to die, and to *rise from the dead* Himself. In fact, Jesus is also speaking of Himself when He says "they have Moses and the prophets to warn them." Indeed Moses, the greatest prophet of the Jews, foretold of a another prophet whom God would raise up even greater than Moses himself - and that prophet was Jesus; the Christ, the Messiah. And it is Himself of whom He is speaking when He says "*If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.*" God's people killed the very prophets He sent to them, and they were about to kill the greatest Prophet ever sent to them, the Prophet even greater than Moses. And though He would beat death and the grave and return to His flock, there would still be disbelief.

And there is quite obviously still disbelief today; the most frequent argument against God and against Jesus is still "I'll believe when I see proof." The sun, the moon, and the stars aren't enough proof. An ordered Creation on a planet that can sustain life is not enough proof. Our bodies with miles of nerves and veins and organs all operating in perfect unison are not enough proof. The fact that we are conscious, sentient beings with hearts and minds and souls made to love and serve one another is not enough proof. The fact that God *visited His people* in the person of Jesus Christ who *conquered death* is not enough proof. The world still waits for signs and wonders even though it's been given proof upon proof of a Creator and Redeemer.

So how do we respond to this, what's our charge? Our obvious charge is to succeed where the rich man failed; we are to right his wrong. We are to love and serve our brothers and sisters. When we see suffering, it is our absolute moral obligation as Christians to do whatever we are able in order to lessen or

negate that suffering. We cannot simply rest on our laurels in a world that is in constant physical and spiritual suffering; to do so makes us anathema to God. And the suffering we address cannot simply be the things we see in the immediate, such as hunger and homelessness, although those certainly rank very highly. Remember, the rich man ignored the plight of Lazarus when the feral dogs, unclean animals, licked Lazarus' wounds thereby making him unclean according to Jewish custom. This speaks to the other kind of suffering we must do our best to eradicate - spiritual suffering. It's easy to give a homeless person food, but it's hard to witness to the glory of God. We do not make ourselves vulnerable when we donate clothes to a clothing drive in the winter, but we make ourselves incredibly vulnerable when we want to share our faith in Christ. The real rub of course is that this isn't an either/or scenario - it's "all of the above." By all means, feed the hungry and clothe the poor, that is the charge given to us and one we should take very seriously. But we cannot be silent in our faith, as it is the peace of Christ and the healing and eternal life He offers which we are also charged to share, in the great commission. The world may still be waiting for signs and wonders the likes of which it won't see, but we can make our Christian faith into something real and palpable, something which the world *cannot help* but see, when we share not only our material wealth, but our spiritual wealth as well. When we see the face of Christ on the afflicted, the downtrodden, and yes, even the disbelievers (whose affliction is disbelief itself), and we minister to them in both body *and* spirit, we accomplish what the rich man, ever left to contemplate his own selfishness, failed to accomplish - we fulfill Christ's command that we love our neighbors as ourselves.

AMEN.