

**Trinity 5**  
**Parable 5, Dives and Lazarus**  
**Luke 16: 19-31**

There is an old story about heaven and hell that you may already know. A man dies and goes to hell, and is surprised to find that it is full of banqueting tables groaning with food, which doesn't seem to be quite his idea of eternal deprivation. Then he finds that the only thing available to eat the food with is three-foot-long chopsticks, and he realizes that this is in fact a particularly exquisite form of eternal deprivation. He can see the food, he can smell the food; he just can't get it into his mouth. After a few aeons, he qualifies for parole, and asks the Almighty if he can just go up to heaven for a few moments to see what it's like up there. His request is granted; but when he arrives he finds that it looks just like hell: full of banqueting tables groaning with food, and yes, there are

only three-foot-long chopsticks to eat it with. 'So hang on', he says, 'I don't quite get this. What's the difference between heaven and hell?' 'Well, you see', comes the reply, 'in heaven we feed each other.'

The contrast between heaven and hell in today's gospel story is rather more conventional. First we see heaven and hell on earth: the rich man in his sumptuous clothing and endless feasting contrasted with the poor man sleeping in his doorway, starving and suppurating. The fact that the dogs come and lick his sores is not, in the story, an indication of natural compassion, but to a Jewish hearer shows that he really is the lowest of the low: to call someone a dog is the worst of insults. The years pass, however, and death intervenes, and suddenly the positions are reversed. Lazarus – his name means 'God has helped' – is up there in heaven, which is what the phrase 'lying in the bosom of Abraham' means, while Dives – his name is

simply the Latin word for a rich man – is now the one who is ‘not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under his table’. There was a time, not so very long ago, when civilized society recognized this state of affairs as part of the divine order: We used to sing a verse in ‘All things bright and beautiful’ that ran ‘The rich man in his castle/The poor man at his gate/He made them high or lowly/And ordered their estate’. Poverty was not only inevitable, but in some sense sanctified, because the poor, like Lazarus, would reap their reward in heaven.

Up to this point the story Jesus is telling is a traditional one, structured according to a time-honoured formula, and our stained glass window reflects the stylized nature of the narrative. Like the first two windows we looked at, there is a clear contrast between the rich man and the poor man, the self-satisfied and the penitent. But this window is divided horizontally, so that Dives occupies the upper

portion of the space and Lazarus the lower part. The two men are the mirror image of each other, both reclining on one elbow while the other hand is stretched out. The rich man’s clothing is colourful and sumptuous and he looks prosperous and well-fed. Lazarus on the other hand is wearing only a bit of cloth for decency’s sake; he has no head-covering and in one hand he carries a wooden staff. His hair and beard are as pale as his skin and contribute to our sense that he is undernourished and ill. Behind him there is an archway with a metal grille that puts us in mind of a prison, while the rich man’s chamber is full of elaborate draperies and pieces of pottery. While the rich man has indoor plants, the poor man has only the flowers of the wayside. In the background to the main picture, we can make out four little groups of animals: in the upper part of the picture, a squirrel, playfully chasing his tail, and what might just be a lizard basking (a lounge lizard,

perhaps?). These could be allusions to the good life, though the idea of a creature chasing its tail also contains a hint of futility. In the lower half of the window, we see birds, and those on the right hand side certainly seem to be pecking at crumbs. Around the edge of the picture we see the words 'Thou in thy lifetime receivedst good, Lazarus evil things'. What interests me particularly in this picture is the symmetrical gesture of reaching out: the rich man holds out a chalice which is being filled with wine by a servant, while Lazarus holds out his empty hand in a beseeching gesture and receives nothing.

Look at it a different way, and the picture then becomes an image of heaven and hell. The figure in the upper part of the picture is Lazarus, lying, as it were, in the bosom of Abraham, his cup running over. The figure in the lower part of the picture is Dives, alone and abandoned, empty-

handed for all eternity. As the story tells us, Lazarus is comforted, and Dives is in torment.

In the traditional version of the story Jesus was telling, the rich man's request for someone to go back and warn people on earth about what had happened to him is granted. The implication is that people will change their ways when they see this terrible warning example, and so good will eventually come out of evil. But in Jesus's version of the story, the request is not granted. Between Dives and Lazarus 'a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' At one level, this is of course a story about rich and poor; but it is more than anything a story about judgement. There comes a point when what we do on earth is judged; and we may well be found wanting. It is too late then to make excuses about how much we wanted to help, but couldn't afford it

or didn't get round to it. About how there were so many good causes competing for our attention and our generosity; about how difficult it is to tell whether someone is in genuine need, or just a scrounger. After all, we've all seen Lazarus sleeping in a doorway somewhere, haven't we? – pale and undernourished, with only a dog for company.

Jesus is telling his hearers that the problem is not that people don't know, but that they can't hear. The sceptics – the Pharisees and the Sadducees – are looking for a sign. They want Lazarus sent from heaven to warn people how things will be. But they have signs a-plenty and they ignore them; and they probably wouldn't take any notice even if someone did come back from the dead – any more than we do.

It sums up the whole problem of trying to pass on the Christian message. Somebody did come back from the

dead, to tell us that death and sin don't have the last word; that life is to be had in all its fullness if only we love God with all our heart and mind and love our neighbour as ourselves. But there are always good reasons why that message can't be heard, reasons to do with prudence and security as well as selfishness and greed; with common sense and not getting carried away.

Suppose we did throw caution to the winds and let ourselves be carried away by the ridiculous generosity of God? Might we not find that heaven and hell were no longer distant possibilities at the far end of the tunnel of life, but the realities of everyday existence? That judgement was not so much something that happened to us, but something we made happen every day through our own choices? That we could choose, either to shut ourselves off from God in a hell of our own making, or to open ourselves to compassion and generosity? To keep the

food and the chopsticks to ourselves, and starve; or to  
circumvent the cruelties of life by feeding each other – and  
live? [1372]