



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

THE SIXTEENTH
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST

September 25, 2022

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

The notion of an afterlife finds its roots in the scenario portrayed in the Gospel reading this morning. The Jewish people were troubled that life was unfair. Bad people had good lives. Good people had bad lives. And that was that. But it made no sense if one, as they did, embrace a loving and just God. So, if life on earth was so often unjust, there must be something more to assure that justice was achieved. And that meant that life had to continue after earthly death.

That understanding is reflected in the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich, uncaring man, is tormented in his afterlife. The poor, neglected man lives in comfort. Exactly the opposite of their lives on earth. And an outcome that appeals to our sense of justice. But it requires an understanding that we continue to live after our earthly death.

For us as followers of Christ, that has been an article of faith at least since the resurrection. And even today, inquiries into the existence and nature of life after death have been creeping into the mainstream of scientific research, to say nothing of modern literature and cinema. And some of the anecdotal evidence is quite compelling. We have no way of knowing reliably what scientific inquiry had revealed by the first century, but Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians hints provocatively at the existence of heaven or Paradise, which Paul claims to have visited and where he encountered the risen Christ:

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows – was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. (2 Cor. 12:2-4)

And Paul apparently knew how to keep a secret.

Nonetheless, the notion of an afterlife that depended on how people lived their lives was well-entrenched among the Pharisees, who, unlike the Saducees, believed in an afterlife. This is why the plot of Jesus' story made so much sense to Jesus' listeners 2000 years ago. The fortunes of the rich man and the beggar were flipped in their afterlives.

But was Jesus relegating the rich man to everlasting torment simply because he was rich and living a luxurious life accordingly? Is the message of this story "Money is bad, so give it to the church." Yes, we have an obligation to support the church, and, yes, we have an obligation to give to the poor. That's called almsgiving, and it is a distinct obligation from supporting the Church.

But that is not what Jesus was getting at. The obligation to give to support the priests and the Temple and to care for the poor, widows and orphans, was well-established in the Law and the Prophets. And Jesus was not diminishing them. He was putting a gloss on them that revealed a world in which people embraced the Law and held up their lives to its true meaning, to love the one true God and to love one's neighbor.

It was much more than complying with the rules, it was orienting one's life to God and God's vision for creation. It was in terms Jesus emphasized, living as if the Kingdom of God was realized already on earth as it is in heaven.

And it was - and is - a Kingdom that turns the world upside down. Where wealth and power and prestige hold no value. Where one's life is measured against the command to love one another, which meant at least, caring for the sick, the poor, the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned, the oppressed, the exploited, the widows, the orphans, and so on.

So the rich man's sin was not his wealth. It was his orientation and perspective and attitude, shaped by earthly rather than heavenly values. A beggar was just part of the landscape of life that prompted no notice and required no response. He would walk by Lazarus every day, and the sight of the beggar became so familiar it blended into the scenery, of no more import than a tree or a shrub. He felt no tug on his heart, no grief, no pity, no compassion. He never thought it unusual or noteworthy that Lazarus lived in constant pain and abject poverty, while he wined and dined in luxury and finery. He saw Lazarus every time he walked by him, but never really saw him at all.

Even in his tormented afterlife when the rich man saw Lazarus, he still accorded him no more status than a servant. "Send Lazarus" to bring me some water. "Send Lazarus" to warn my brothers. For the rich man and his self-indulgent life, the world was still upright.

The Kingdom of God, to say nothing of the dictates of the Law and the entreaties of the Prophets, never formed the framework of his life, never entered into the way he lived his life. He never saw beyond himself. And if he did, he never saw others beyond their role in serving him.

So Jesus' message says nothing about wealth *per se*. But it says everything about how we approach life. Do we really see the world around us as the breeding ground for God's Kingdom on Earth as it is in heaven? Do we understand Jesus' command that we cultivate the Kingdom of God, even if we know we will never see it fully realized? Do we really embrace how God's Kingdom turns the world upside down? Do we hold up every aspect of our lives to how life should be lived - and ultimately will be - in the Kingdom of God?

Will we really mean it a few minutes from now when we pray "God's kingdom come, God's will be done on Earth as it is in heaven?"

Have we learned from our focus on the funeral rituals for Queen Elizabeth that a sovereign, a king or queen, provides unity and continuity to a nation or culture or people - or to a Church? That, indeed, the Kingdom of God unites us not only across all our divisions, but also with our history and our destiny? Do we realize that we all are as subjects of the same divine king and that our citizenship is in the Kingdom of God? Do we understand that the Kingdom of God turns the world we know and way we live upside down?

May we be more perceptive than the rich man who saw all this too late?