

Do I Need A Neighbour?

St. George's Angl.

Parktown

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O.T.: Deutr. 15 vs. 7-11 N.T.: 1 Joh 4: 15-21

Gospels: Luke 16 vs. 19-31.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus raises a number of crucial questions - some of them very difficult to face. The parable centres around the question: Who is my neighbour? or if I'm allowed to ~~turn~~ from it the other way around: To whom am I a neighbour? But the rich man's attitude and actions in fact present the issue of neighbourly relations in a totally different perspective for he in fact is asking the opposite of what we as Christians believe to be the fundamental need of every human being: He is in fact saying: Do I really need a neighbour?

As I read this parable (and please let us remember that our misunderstanding and misinterpretation of this pronouncement of Jesus should be seen in the light of its being a parable) there are 4 outstanding features which leave a deep impression on my mind:

1. The total indifference of the rich man to the presence and predicament of Lazarus: Here is a rich man surrounded by all his earthly goods, feasting day after day and enjoying life with all those friends who surround him as his guests. At the gate of his vast estate there lies this man Lazarus. In all probability he is blissfully ignorant of this beggar's ~~misery~~

existence but even if he is not ignorant he is totally indifferent to his poverty, his suffering and his need. He makes no attempt to relieve his hunger, to save his body, to change his circumstances. He is so absorbed in his denial & denial, in his ostentation being that he has no interest of any kind in such people as Lazarus.

→ Is such a situation possible? Unfortunately all too true: history abounds in examples of individuals and communities who were deliberately insensitive or blind to the needs of others. In Africa ^{today} millions of people are dying of hunger. In S.A. through the policies of forced removals and resettlement there is widespread hunger & starvation - and yet many in our country largely ignore, repress or refuse to face the stark tragedy of these conditions which exist in our midst!

2. The ^{unexpected} reversal of roles: In the parable this takes place at the death of each with the poverty of the beggar turning to abundance and his suffering into enjoyment whilst the rich man enters the time of suffering & torture / For many centuries many theologians have interpreted the message of this parable as that of Jesus telling the poor & the suffering that the solution to their agony, their true comfort and hope, could only be expected in life after death. During the last 60-70 years however a sharp reaction has set in ① Karl Marx and his followers have criticized the church by stating that the only solution the church can offer to the problem of poverty and hunger is to postpone it to an unknown life hereafter ② A growing number of econo-

mists, sociologists ^{of the West} theologians (esp. of the Third World) have been saying ^{something else} much more can be done to diminish poverty and want and to create more just economic situations ^{order} for millions of people - and in that sense the rolls can be reversed and thus the faith and hope expressed in the Word Lazarus (meaning God my Helper) can be realised!

3. The stark reality of the great divide. The parable graphically depicts the great gulf, the deep chasm which eventually confronts the people on the different sides. A situation is eventually created when it is no longer possible to cross this chasm or to reach each other and thus to communicate as God intended that human beings should communicate.

Although Christ is not stating it in these explicit terms I believe He wants to convey to us the painful truth that persons or communities who refuse to act as true neighbours to others end up by creating such a deep divide between themselves and those whom they have ignored, neglected, ^{despised} or rejected that meaningful human communication becomes almost impossible.

Isn't this true of a large sector of our society to-day where the perception of reality and the interpretation of ~~justice~~ ^{solutions} on the white side differs so deeply from the perception on the black side that meaningful communication and understanding becomes virtually impossible?

Take a long & painful process to be able to discover & understand each other!

Or, if it is still possible, that the process [4] of estrangement is advancing so rapidly that the different worlds in which we live in this one country will make it practically impossible to bridge this gulf within a short span of time!

4. The tragic inability to hear and to heed: The rich man pleads with Abraham: "Please go and deliver a message of warning to my 5 brothers to learn from their brother's bitter experiences and thus avoid the torment which he is going through." But Abraham is unable to offer the ~~same~~ salace which this man hopes for: "They have Moses & the prophets" i.e. they have the truth of God's word, his good news. If they do not listen to that they will not hear even if somebody comes from the dead to convey the message!

The answer of Abraham is very revealing - and deeply disturbing. He in fact is saying that individuals or a community could over a long period of time become so involved in a process of ^{ignoring the needs of others} inflicting injustice on others that their compassion becomes impaired, their conscience is blunted and their moral consciousness deeply affected. Eventually a moment of finality arrives where they can no longer hear because

for such a long time they did not want (5)
to hear. When that final stage has been reached
not even a miracle will influence the
moral judgment of such an individual or
such a community.

I knew that what I have conveyed to
you in this sermon this morning may sound
very negative and depressing. This is ~~not~~
neither my intention nor my motivation
but I would be failing in my duty as
minister of the gospel if I refuse to
portray what I regard to be a message
which urgently needs to be heard ^{today,} especially
by the white sector of our Christian com-
munity. (X) But I would equally fail in my
duty if I do not stress that God's love
and God's grace ~~is~~ has the divine
power of drawing ~~at~~ any one of us from
darkness ^{blindness} into light, from selfish enjoyment to
sharing in joy, lack of compassion to deep
and loving concern,