

Collect, Readings and Reflection for 28 September 2025, the 15th Sunday after Trinity

Collect (*the Church's prayer for today*):

God, who in generous mercy sent the Holy Spirit upon your Church in the burning fire of your love: grant that your people may be fervent in the fellowship of the gospel that, always abiding in you, they may be found steadfast in faith and active in service; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Or

Lord God, defend your Church from all false teaching and give to your people knowledge of your truth, that we may enjoy eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Readings: Luke 16:19-37

Today's reflection is by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Cain.

Everything to live for

When I am browsing in book shops, one of the shelves I always swing by is the self-help section. I find it fascinating to try to understand latest trends in this genre and I'm always interested to see whether any religious books or texts are included in the shops collection. A few years ago, one of the books available on the self-help shelf was called *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. It caught my eye, not because of the title, but because the author was the American journalist, Mitch Albom. Rebecca and I had both found his earlier book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, helpful at a point in our life together.

The Five People You Meet in Heaven is a moving story about an 83-year-old amusement park maintenance man named Eddie who dies in a tragic accident while trying to save a little girl. Eddie goes to heaven. When he's there he learns that he, like everybody in heaven, must meet five individuals from his life. In Eddie's case, two of the people he knew well; one person he knew a little; and two of the people he had never met, but each explained something about his life that he didn't know, and each taught him one thing so that he could find eternal rest. One of Eddie's people puts it like this: "Each of us was in your life for a reason. You may not have known that reason at the time, and that is what Heaven is for. For understanding your life on earth."

This is an interesting approach, but it is hardly original. Several spiritual traditions have stories of people learning truths after death so they can be unburdened, find rest and ascend to a final home in Heaven. The Gospel story we've just heard about Lazarus, and a rich man is a parable told by Jesus from that tradition.

Luke, the gospel-writer, has a clear interest in wealth and its pitfalls, and his account of Jesus' life contains several of Jesus' stories in which wealth is the focus. The first thing we might notice in this story is that while the poor man is named, Lazarus, which means God helps, the rich man is not – he's just a rich man. In fact, Lazarus is the only person with a name in any of Jesus' parables recalled by Luke – and that surely elevates his status or importance in the story.

We might not know the rich man's name, but we do know some things about him. He dressed in purple, which was a very expensive colour in Jesus' time, and he lived in luxury every day. So, this was not just a rich man, but someone whose wealth was conspicuous. Later in the story, when the rich man makes his appeal to Father Abraham, his ancestor, we discover that he has five brothers. There is no mention of a wife or children. We might think nothing of this, but Jesus' hearers would have inferred a certain self-centredness on the part of the man who had not fathered a family and done what was expected of him. Here was a man living for himself with little regard for his community.

We also know that the rich man knew who Lazarus was because, when he makes his appeal to Abraham, he mentions Lazarus by name. Notice also the text which says that Lazarus was laid at the rich man's gate, suggesting perhaps that someone put him there. The original Greek is more literally translated, 'Lazarus had been placed', which is even stronger. Putting these two things together, the rich man knew Lazarus who had been placed at his gate, presumably with some expectation that the rich man should and would help him. He did not.

And there is one final thing to notice about the rich man. He is unrepentant. When he calls out to Abraham, he wants Lazarus to attend on him; to give him a drink. Maybe this request gives a clue about how Lazarus was known to the rich man in life. Perhaps he was a servant or former slave of the rich man who became too ill to work. The rich man did not do what was expected of him in life and look after his former employee but, in death, he expects Lazarus to adopt his former position as a servant or slave. He is unrepentant.

When this request is denied, the rich man doesn't ask to be allowed to warn his brothers himself. Once again, he asks for Lazarus to be permitted to go on his behalf. Whatever lesson or truth the rich man is supposed to be learning from Lazarus, he seems unwilling or unable to grasp it. It is this unwillingness, this unrepentance that maintains a chasm between the rich man and Lazarus that cannot be crossed.

On the face of it then, this is a simple story whose meaning is obvious. Wealthy people create hell for themselves when they don't share their riches and neglect the needs of the poor. But there is more to this story ...

It may be tempting to condemn him simply for being rich, but Jesus' story does not do that. Jesus' story condemns the rich man for his self-centredness and lack of care. In life it is easy to see how the rich man could have attended to Lazarus' need. He was laid at the gate and so needed shelter. He was covered in sores and so needed medicine. He longed to eat and so needed food. These basic provisions would all have blessed Lazarus. It is less easy to imagine how Lazarus could have blessed the rich man, until we imagine Jesus' asking this question: "How do you bridge the chasm between this rich man and Lazarus? How do you free this rich man from the prison of his own selfishness and lack of care?" The answer is to provide opportunities for him to share his wealth. While greed is concerned with getting, the gospel is concerned with giving. And if one's life is focused purely on getting then you will never be satisfied, and bookshops will continue to do a good trade in self-help.

I suspect that none of us here will identify with either of the two main characters in Jesus' story: difficult for us perhaps to imagine being one so outrageously affluent, or one so completely desperate. So, where might we find ourselves in the story? Perhaps we can identify with the rich man's brothers. Perhaps this story will do what Lazarus was not able to do – leave Abraham's side in Heaven. Perhaps this story will serve as a warning for us to see and attend to the beggar at our own gate. Bear in mind that this is not someone we will need to go out and look for. They will come across our path – we may even know them by name.

And here's the good news. Christian faith is not a self-help exercise. The whole point of the Christian faith, the whole point of our baptism is that we cannot help ourselves across the chasms that exist between us and God and us and each other. But with Jesus help, we can. Jesus' life, death and resurrection have bridged the chasm between us and God for all time. And following Jesus, daily turning away from sin and evil that divide and destroy, and turning to Jesus, we learn to see the people who come to our gate as a blessing, and we cross the chasms between us. The best news ... this is the path to abundant life because, when we do this, we don't just have everything to live with, but everything to live for.

Amen.

