

A GENEROUS GIVER?  
LUKE 16:19-31

We've all seen them; people who sit in shop doorways, or near cash-points, begging. They sit with their tin-can, or paper cup, asking you for change as you walk along Princes St. Sometimes they have their dog with them; is that for companionship or protection? You will have your own way of responding to them. Sometimes, if you watch for long enough and carefully, as they leave they change and the shabby beggar becomes the well-dressed young woman in smart clothes and so you're left to wonder just how genuine some of these people are. So we can become cynical about the needs of those who appear poor, but may not be; we live in a world where people exploit the poverty of others to perpetrate these kinds of scams and turn begging into a business opportunity. Those who are genuinely in need suffer more as a result.

Jesus told a powerful parable about someone sitting at the gate of the rich man's house. The beggar is called Lazarus, the only named character in any of Jesus' parables, different from real-life Lazarus in other stories. Sometimes the rich man is called Dives, but that just means 'rich man' in Latin! This parable comes in the midst of a number of pieces of teaching about life-issues, especially money, and what impact God's kingship should have on these life-issues! "*No servant...*" (16:13) In the gospels, Jesus says more about money than about almost any other life-issue that might affect His disciples, yet in Church we are twitchy about the subject and almost have to deal with it by apologising for doing it. Jesus doesn't, so why should we.

The theme of the parable is: be generous to others; don't be self-centred and selfish. The rich man had everything that he needed; fine clothes, he lived in luxury. At his gate, sat Lazarus, the poor man, begging, with his physical misery and destitution emphasized by the way Jesus describes him. The implication is that the rich man did nothing to help Lazarus; he was longing for crumbs, but not even crumbs were given to him. Anyway both men died and their fortunes were reversed, Lazarus is in the comfort and joy of heaven and the rich man in hell and torment. Even there, he wants to exercise his superiority by sending Lazarus on a mission to his family to warn them. The values of the rich man's world are reversed and fixed and he has to live with the consequences of the way in which he lived his life.

"(The rich man) is not said to have committed any grave sin, but he lived only for himself. In that lay his condemnation." (Morris) We think of the Pharisees as super-religious people, zealous for law-keeping; but see what Luke says of them: "*The Pharisees...*" (16:14) The parable is about the rich man and his money but it could be the politician and his power, the academic with his intellect, the preacher with his eloquence and all of these can become self-obsessed because they are very gifted individuals, or very wealthy or powerful; all they see is themselves and how they can develop and exploit their gifted-ness for their own ends and they don't care about anyone else; all they care about is that they are the centre of their own world, that when they walk into the room, everyone looks at them and hangs on their every word. Because the Pharisees and the rich man were so self-centred, they either forgot to listen or were unable to listen to Moses and the prophets, to the Bible and what the Bible would teach. If they had listened, they would have known that everywhere the Bible tells us to care for the poor and outcasts in society; everywhere the Bible tells us to love others and be generous and think of others before ourselves.

There is a profound challenge in this parable:

- For us as individuals – to be generous in our giving. This is about money, but not only money. We are rich, maybe not in terms of other people in the city, but in global terms we are rich. Half of world's population lives on less than \$2 a day. The Church is running a stewardship campaign at end of this month to help develop and support church for the future and we hope that you will give that your serious consideration. But the challenge is not just about money: we all have some gift or other; perhaps we have some time to give; the challenge we face is to use these gifts, that time to serve Christ in world, through the Church and there are a whole variety of ways, from cleaning the premises to play music and sing, to care for people, to teach children the Bible. The challenge for all of us is to be generous in our giving and that's for you to work out for yourself what that means; the challenge is to let God's kingship touch our hearts, hands, pockets and diaries to be generous people.
- For us as Church – becomes so easy for a Church to become self-centred as Church. We feel the pressure for financial survival as much as any other Church does in Scotland at present. What are we to do? The natural instinct is to focus on our own needs and make sure that we have enough to keep the wheels turning over as Church. The challenge we face as Church is to keep looking out to people in need: to give to Christian work amongst the poor of Cambodia for example; to think about the needs of people in our community who are outside Church, what can we do for them? How can we give them gospel? How can we help them discover grace of God? The challenge for us is to be a Church that is generous by instinct, that wants to give and keep giving and that is not simply obsessed by itself, its internal workings, its survival.

*“Remember this...God loves...” (2 Cor 9:6f)* “If a man (says Jesus) cannot be humane with (the Bible) in his hand and Lazarus on his doorstep, nothing... will teach him otherwise.” (AM Hunter) Not even someone rising from dead will persuade him! The Bible teaches us to be generous to others, in our giving, in our attitudes; how many people are hurt by unthinking mean-spirited words? In the way we think about other people, in the way we speak to one another, in what we give of money, time, and talents, in every aspect of life – let us be generous, open-hearted, open-handed people; that is the challenge for all of us. Are we ‘lovers of money’ or are we lovers of the things of God, letting the Bible shape our view of the world, to be generous, passionate for justice, to care for one another? It is a challenging choice!