

## Address by Nigel Guthrie for 25 September 2022 at St David's Church

The story of the rich man and Lazarus feels rather different from some of the other parables we find in St Luke's Gospel. It sounds more like a stock story, without the ring of emotional truth that we find in the parables of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son. I wonder if Jesus is re-telling an existing fable for his own purposes?

But there's no doubt that it fits well into Luke's scheme for chapter 16 of his gospel which deals with the use of money, starting off with the parable of the dishonest steward. It also fits with the special concern we find throughout Luke's Gospel for the poor and for marginalized groups including women and Samaritans.

And at first sight this parable looks a good deal easier to interpret than that of the Dishonest Steward that we heard last week. The rich man, often known as Dives, from the Latin for rich man, enjoyed life in this world but faced punishment in the next. Whereas Lazarus had a rough time here but was rewarded with eternal comforts in heaven.

What we don't know is how the two behaved. For all we know Lazarus might have been a criminal who had fallen on hard times and Dives might have been a successful businessman who treated his employees well and gave money to charity. We just don't know. It seems that Dives could have been more generous to Lazarus; after all Lazarus was sitting at his gate hungry and covered in sores. But then Dives did at least allow Lazarus the leftover food from his table - which perhaps isn't so very different from being part of a society in which increasing numbers of people rely on Foodbanks to feed their families.

So this is where the parable becomes pretty uncomfortable for us. We may not see ourselves as wealthy, and unless you're keeping quiet, I'm not aware of any Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos or Bill Gates level wealth within our congregation! But most of us are relatively wealthy. Indeed, just living in this country makes us so, even though divisions of wealth seem to be widening quite dramatically here at the moment. But compared with many people in

developing countries we are very wealthy indeed. So, I'm sorry to say, that aligns us more closely with Dives than with Lazarus.

But before we go off in despair I would like to suggest that it would be a mistake to take this story too literally. Not least the bit about the conversation between Dives and Abraham. This is where the nature of the story as fable becomes especially apparent.

However the parable contains some useful warnings for us, not least as we celebrate harvest.

Firstly, it tells us that the injustices of this world do not go unnoticed by God and that we will be held accountable for how we have lived. Yes, God will look in mercy on our mistakes and failings, but we are still accountable for what we have been given. That's a message which comes through loud and clear in Jesus' teaching, not least in the parable of the rich farmer that we heard earlier on the summer.

I wonder if Bill Gates knows this story of Dives and Lazarus? He has pledged to drop off the world's list of richest people by giving away most of his fortune. He has some way to go as I believe he is still worth around 100 billion US dollars so it will take a concerted effort to shift that lot! But he does seem to realise that amassing a personal fortune brings responsibilities for those who could be helped by the money. And on a different level that is true for all of us. As we sometimes say at the offertory during Holy Communion, 'All things come from you, and of your own do we give you'. Christians recognise that what we have comes from God and ultimately is on loan to us to use as wisely and well as we can. So God notices the injustices of the world and calls on us to do whatever we can to address them.

And secondly the parable reminds us that our wealth has no lasting value and does not carry rights. And this has always been at odds with the way in which many people view money which can buy all the sort of things we think we want like nice houses and possessions, holidays and comfort. Even our donations to charity, if they are public, can confer a certain status. And perhaps above

all wealth can deliver us from anxiety about how we are going to manage, which is an urgent fear for many people at the moment. But of, course, money can't buy what we most deeply desire which is love; love from God and from other people.

So, at this Harvest time alongside our thanksgiving for the good things we enjoy, we should be mindful of how we can share our wealth with those in need. We had a very enjoyable but challenging Green Event here yesterday and, as we are learning, it is the poorest who are going to suffer fastest and most through climate change. To some extent our wealth and the particular climate of this country give us some protection. But in place where houses are flimsy and winds and floods are violent people have no such benefits. That is why we wanted to support the Disaster Emergency Committee's appeal for Pakistan alongside our collection of goods for the Esther Community. Many young people, most of whom don't own property, are facing the crippling challenge of expensive accommodation. When this is made worse by family breakdown or other issues it can make life extremely difficult and stressful. It is privilege that in various ways our church can support the Esther Community and the YMCA as they help young people in our city who have hit problems in their lives by providing care and accommodation. These might not look like regular harvest gifts, but they could be life changing for those who benefit.