

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST 2016 LUKE 16:19-31

The journey on the London Underground from my apartment to the office where I worked was only 20 minutes, but that morning it seemed like hours. Anxiety will do that to you. It grabs the minutes and expands them until they are unbearably eternal. In the evenings, on my way home, the clickety-clack of the wheels on the rails soothed me, rocked me gently towards, and even into, sleep. This morning, however, each clickety reminded me of the frightening task ahead, each clack taunted me.

The train station nestled on the edge of a pocket park on the north bank of the Thames, about 400-yards from my workplace. Three days earlier, as I strode that quarter mile, I noticed a young man sitting on the street, huddled in a blanket, politely asking for money from passersby. I was used to homeless people. It was London. It was 1990. I was so familiar with this sight that I became hardened to it. Blind, even. Apathy had grown scales over my eyes, so much so that that I'd grown accustomed to not seeing. But if there was one tiny piece of my eyesight that had not become obscured by apathy, this man wandered into it and forced me to behold him. He was wearing surprisingly good clothes; he spoke with an educated accent, he had the look of a stranger to a life on the street. He didn't belong there. And I passed him by. The next day he was there again. And the next. And I passed him by. By now he had crawled inside my head, had squeezed his way into my eyes and was chiseling away at those scales that time and apathy had grown. He whispered in my ear, bugging me with questions. Why was he on the street? Did he have a drink or drug problem? Was he mentally ill and unable to manage life in conventional society? Had he been abused or treated cruelly by his family and run away from home? Where did he come from? What was it like to be him, robbed of his dignity, his comforts and the basic human right to have a roof over his head and food in his stomach?

I needed to know. And so, after three days of trying to ignore him, that morning I was not going to walk past, like the religious types in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. I was going to give in to his silent nagging in my head, and stop, and unload my questions. I HAD to discover his story. I was compelled to help him - in some way - recapture the divine spark in his soul which his circumstances had tried, in vain, to extinguish.

And so that Thursday morning I got ready to go to work with purpose. I rehearsed what I was going to say in the shaving mirror. I sat on the train imagining the conversation we'd have. I put a couple of pound coins in my pocket that I planned to give him, maybe walk with him around the corner to a coffee shop on the Strand and sit with him for a while. At last, I stepped off the train with nervous energy. I strode up the escalator to embrace the dangerous opportunity God had given me. I emerged into the London morning. I arrived at the shop doorway that had been home to this young man for the last three days. And he wasn't there. He wasn't there the next day either. And I never saw him again. Maybe he moved on to a more lucrative street to beg. Maybe he sought help or returned home. Maybe he was lying in the hospital, the victim of a violent mugging. Maybe, a few days later, the river police dragged his body from the

Thames. I don't know. The only thing I know for sure is this: I was able to have compassion and act. I could have demonstrated God's love for him, but I didn't.

So I read about the rich man that Jesus describes in his troubling, troubling parable that is our lesson from Luke this morning, and I wince. It's a tale of two men. For one it is the best of times, for the other the worst. One moves in the company of royalty. In fact, he possibly is royalty, given that he wears purple cloth. He has a condo in Beverly Hills, a suite in Manhattan, and a modest hundred acres in the country. His clothes bear the labels Gucci and Armani, and his car has a silver lady on the hood. Bank executives wine and dine him, hoping to for the chance to look after his wealth, while the value of his investment portfolio dwarfs the GDP of large swaths of Africa. The other man, well, he just lies at the gates to the billionaire's mansion, and waits to die - invisible, except to the rich man's dogs that lick his festering body. This wretched soul has nothing but a name - Lazarus.

Well, the good news for Lazarus is that this parable is a rags-to-riches story. The bad news for the wealthy man is it is a riches-to-rags story. Both men die and Lazarus, says Jesus, is carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man goes in the other direction. In torment, he looks up and sees Lazarus next to Abraham, and he calls out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to give me some water." But Abraham replies, "I can't do that. During your lifetime you received good things, and Lazarus had a terrible life. But now he is here in comfort, but you are suffering." But the rich man bargains, "Even if he can't come and give me a drink then please at least send him to my father's house, and warn my five brothers to start living right and avoid this awful place." But Abraham responds, "They have the Bible - if they won't listen to that, then they won't listen even to a dead man who comes back to life."

Now, what are we going to do with this parable, people? Really. It's days like this I wish I'd listened to my careers adviser and become a lion tamer. This story raises big problems for modern thoughtful Christians like us. It **seems** that Jesus is saying, "if you're poor in this life then you'll have an amazing time after you die, and if you're rich you'll end up being tortured." Hands up everyone who is happy with that interpretation. Hands up if you're still happy with it when I tell you that in global perspective we are all in the top few percent of wealth-holders. So, relax. That's not what Jesus is teaching. Also, this parable is not about the nature of heaven and hell. But, I can see why you'd think it is. Here's the truth about parables. They only have one point to them, and in this parable the point is not the nature of life after death or the criteria by which God judges mankind. It is about one thing, and one thing only. And here it is. 'The soul-destroying disease of apathy.' Especially, apathy in the face of human suffering and injustice. As Edmund Burke put it, "All it takes for evil to prosper is for good men to do nothing".

Maybe many years ago, perhaps when Lazarus first showed up at his gates, the rich man noticed him. Perhaps he even took pity on him. It's possible that when he glanced out of his window he saw this pathetic figure of a man huddled in the street his heart was moved. Maybe there was a pang of empathy, a fleeting solidarity with his fellow

traveler. But instead of acting on what his heart was saying he decided that life was too short to pay attention to such distractions. Listen carefully and you'll hear him, "It's a tragedy, I know, but it is what it is. The poor will always be with us. And helping is risky. When we reach out to the disadvantaged they may exploit our goodness. Some bad types might slip through the net. What's the point of helping one unfortunate person when there'll be another one along to take his place? And in any case, if you do help such people you will actually be harming them - it will only encourage them to live off charity rather than take responsibility for themselves."

The first thing that goes is your heart. It becomes closed, hard, calloused. Then, into some tight little crevasse a seed falls. The germ of apathy. And when it takes root and sprouts, its shoots reach up from the heart to the eyes, and you are blinded to the suffering of others. The rich man is trapped in such blindness that even as he endures the place of torment he believes that the purpose of Lazarus is serve him. He still doesn't get it. "Send Lazarus to give me a drink, send him to warn my brothers" he demands of Abraham. He is so blind that he doesn't even give Lazarus things he will never miss – the crumbs that fall from his table.

Maybe the spirit of that rich man, the seed of apathy that grew to blind him to people's suffering, maybe that was in me 26 years ago on the streets of London. Maybe it still is. Perhaps to truly be the hands of Jesus I need to put myself out there in a place where I can be hurt and rejected and misunderstood and taken advantage of. Maybe that is the place where Jesus goes; the doorway of vulnerability, the street of compassion, the place of the cross. Maybe that is where the weed of apathy, covering our eyes is uprooted and nailed.

That story of my humbling is galling enough as it is. But there's a killer detail I haven't told you yet. At the time I was an ordinand. I had gone through the sausage machine of discernment and was now working my notice before going to seminary. Over the previous two years I'd spent most of my waking life thinking about my call to be a priest. I'd spent days on end with leaders of the church, who had examined me on my doctrine and my life. And they had concluded I did indeed have this call.

At the heart of our life as Anglicans stands, in glorious purity, the inspiration we call the Baptismal Covenant. We're going to recite it in a few moments. It starts with three question. Do you believe in God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is what makes our faith unique and it matters. God who loves like a perfect parent, who became human to die and rise for us, and who now lives in us as our comforter and our inspiration.

But we don't stop there. If our faith is real then it will show itself. And so the Baptismal Covenant causes us to face a needy world. We have this wonderful faith in Christ, so now let's go and live like it. We have been raised to a new life - one that is to be marked by loving service to men and women, girls and boys who are made in the Creator's image. We promise to proclaim the Good News, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to strive for peace and justice, respecting the dignity of every human being.

Those three mornings in 1990 on the streets of London I lost sight of the dignity of one young man. I allowed my fear, my discomfort, my prejudice to prevent me serving Christ in that one person. He happened to be homeless, but he could have been anyone who was not like me, whose lifestyle was different, or whose circumstances I did not understand. I hope one day to see him again. On another street (one made of gold) in another city (one that needs no sun or moon because God is on the street). And if I do see him there - with his resurrected and renewed body then I hope he has mercy on me and treats me with the dignity I failed to give him.