

Sermon - parable of the narcissist

Based on: Jeremiah 32.1–3a, 6–15; Psalm 91.1–6, 14–16; 1 Timothy 6.6–19; Luke 16.1–13

Hope in the Lord

- Yesterday our parish took an important step on the journey of discerning what God's desire is for us as a faith community.
- A number of parishioners participated in the workshop called *Re-imagining the Future*, which all parishes in Melbourne Diocese have been asked to undertake.
- This is part of the process of taking stock of where we are as a parish, and recognising what resources are available to us, as we discern a way forwards.
- As we do this, today's reading from Jeremiah's prophecy gives our parish a message of hope, that in spite of the threats of the impact of the pandemic and insufficient income to meet our operational costs, if we are intentional in our faith relationship with God, God will give us a future.
- So let's look briefly at that message of hope in Jeremiah's prophecy, and in the psalm response to that.
- Jeremiah had previously been warning God's people that if they didn't repent from their selfish ways, then the Lord would allow them to be overrun by the enemy.
- And finally the moment arrived when they were indeed being besieged by the Babylonian army, and their world as they knew it, appeared to be at an end.
- But the Lord provided a new message through his prophet - a message of hope.
- Jeremiah symbolically bought a field and had the deed of sale sealed up in a jar so that it could be recovered in due course, and said:

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land. (Jeremiah 32.15)

- Psalm 91 echoes this word of hope for those who have turned to the Lord:
 - ¹ *Those who dwell in the shelter of the Most High:
who abide under the shadow of the Almighty,*
 - ² *They will say to the Lord 'You are my refuge and my stronghold:
my God in whom I trust.'*
 - ⁴ *He will cover you with his wings, and you will be safe under his feathers:
his faithfulness will be your shield and defence.*
 - ¹⁴ *'You have set your love upon me,' says the Lord, 'and therefore I will deliver you:
I will lift you out of danger, because you have known my name.*
 - ¹⁵ *'When you call upon me I will answer you:
I will be with you in trouble, I will rescue you and bring you to honour.*
- The emphasis here is that those who intentionally enact their faith relationship with God - who abide with him - will be kept safe by the Lord God.

Those who choose to stay lost

- This provides a helpful context in which to engage with the Gospel story.
- The parable of the rich man and the poor man - or the parable of the narcissist - comes a little after Jesus has told a few parables about the lost being found, and consequently there being much rejoicing in heaven.
- Those parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son, are metaphors for people whose faith relationship with God had been damaged or broken, and which is then restored.

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- Today's parable is effectively the flip side of that: someone who assumed his faith relationship was fine simply because he was a descendant of Abraham, but was behaving like a narcissist - that is, totally focused on his own wants, instead of responding to the needs of others.
- He is effectively lost to God, and stays lost through his own ongoing choices.

Life, death, heaven, hell, and Hades

- Before we work through the parable itself, it is helpful to recognise a few fundamental concepts.
- Firstly there is the notion of life and death, and the way that Jesus and the New Testament writers use those words can mean two different things.
- There is physical life and physical death: life when you are physically still breathing, and death when you are no longer breathing.
- Then there is spiritual life and spiritual death - which is different, in that one can be spiritually dead while physically alive, and conversely spiritually alive while physically dead.
- Secondly, being spiritually alive is another way of describing being in faith relationship with God, and experiencing heaven - or aspects of heaven.
- Heaven is wherever God is, and when we are in direct communication with God, whether in this world or the next, then we experience heaven, or paradise.
- Hell is where people have excluded themselves from God, whether in this world or the next.
- Thirdly, Jesus describes the rich man and the poor man, Lazarus - first in this earthly world where they are physically alive, and then in Hades - that is the place of the physically dead.
- The Greek concept of Hades was neither about heaven or hell, but simply a metaphorical place of the physically dead.

Lazarus

- So let's look at Lazarus in the story - not to be confused with Jesus' friend, also named Lazarus.
- Jesus honours the poor man by giving him a name: Lazarus, which is derived from the meaning *God has helped*.
- Lazarus is not some unknown anonymous nobody, but a fellow descendant of Abraham - someone who even the rich man recognises in Hades.
- While Lazarus has a physically hellish existence in this world, he gets to experience the fullness of life in the place of the dead, being taken into the bosom of Abraham - which was a metaphor for paradise.
- However, Lazarus is not who the story is about.

The man materially rich but spiritually poor

- The story Jesus tells is about the rich man, who got it wrong, and who just keeps on getting it wrong.
- I suggest that even in this world the rich man is experiencing hell - he just doesn't realise it at the time.
- Why not? Because he is distracted by his materially rich lifestyle.
- The gate of his house is not simply like a garden gate of a suburban home, but the Greek word used is *pylōna* because the gateposts are two great pylons, such is the majestic stature of his residence.
- And when one is able to not just enjoy the occasional feast, but rather feast sumptuously every day, the next day's menu can easily take priority over one's faith relationship with God.
- However, when the rich man goes to Hades then there are no sumptuous feasts, no fine linen, and no magnificent home to distract him from the fact that his spiritual life is impoverished to the point of being destitute.

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- Don't be confused by thinking that the flames tormenting him are external flames - they symbolise what's eating him up, or burning him up, inside himself.

The rich man's poor attitude

- In Jesus' story, the rich man continues to maintain the same attitude that brought him to that position of torment in the first instance.
- In this lifetime he had no regard for Lazarus - did not treat him with dignity, and did not recognise Lazarus as having equal worth and value as himself.
- If he had regarded Lazarus as being of equal worth, and deserving of dignity, he would have addressed Lazarus' needs.
- But in Hades he continues to regard Lazarus as being less worthy than himself - someone who can be ordered around at whim.
- 'Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue' (Luke 16.24) he asks Abraham - rather than asking 'please help me to quench my own thirst'.
- And again, 'send [Lazarus] to my father's house ... that he may warn them' (Luke 16.27-28) he asks Abraham, instead of asking 'help me go to my father's house'.
- Abraham shakes his head, and says that if they aren't already following God's word, then even someone from the dead won't change their minds.
- My own imagination suggests that Abraham is thinking: 'You still don't understand that your own attitude is what is separating you from paradise, and keeping you in agony.'
- I am reminded of a dog carrying a large stick, trying to get through a small gap: as long as the dog keeps hold of the stick it'll never get through.
- The only way the dog can go through to the other side is to let go of what it is holding.
- In the same way, as long as the rich man holds on to his attitude of regarding himself as superior to Lazarus, the chasm will remain, and he will never be able to cross it.

Be rich in good works

- Jesus tells this story for those of us who are still alive, and who might assume that just because we are church members we will automatically experience heaven both now and in the world to come.
- He effectively warns us that if we have the narcissistic attitude of the rich man - focused on our own wants rather than on the needs of others - then we will be spiritually impoverished.
- And this applies to communities as well as individuals: if we as a faith community, as we try to discern our way forward, are focused on what we want, rather than on what the many others who come to our parish site need, then our faith community will likewise be spiritually impoverished.
- The alternative is provided in the passage from the first letter to Timothy, which provides some direct instruction for us in this regard:

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life. (1 Timothy 6.17-19)

- In this is the same message of hope that Jeremiah describes, and about which the Psalmist also writes:

¹⁴ 'You have set your love upon me,' says the Lord, 'and therefore I will deliver you:
I will lift you out of danger, because you have known my name.

¹⁵ 'When you call upon me I will answer you:
I will be with you in trouble, I will rescue you and bring you to honour.

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¹⁶ *'With long life I will satisfy you:
and fill you with my salvation.'* (Psalm 91)

So may you set your love and hope on God.
May you be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.
And may you take hold of the life that really is life.
In his name. Amen.