

**Lent Reflection: Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> March; Scripture: Luke 16:19-end [Jeremiah 17:5-10, Psalm 1]**

*19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 20 At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores<sup>21</sup> and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.<sup>22</sup> "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 24 So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'<sup>25</sup> "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'<sup>27</sup> "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family,<sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'<sup>29</sup> "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'<sup>30</sup> "No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'<sup>31</sup> "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"*

Today's Lent reflection looks at a passage, that for many, is quite uncomfortable reading. Luke's writings are full of wonderful parables, well known in both Christians and secular culture. We read of the return of the prodigals, the dangers of the blind leading the blind, turning to the Samaritans in time of great need, houses being divided, hiding our light under a bushel, building on firm foundations and not on the sand. This story, however, is not commonly heard, even within our churches.

It is a parable with vivid imagery; metaphors of something that is clearly terrifying. It is here in scripture for a reason and at this time of Lent it is good to spend some time reflecting on what it is saying, however disturbing it may be. Jesus speaks repeatedly about the horrors of hell in all of the four gospels. Phrases like 'weeping and gnashing of teeth', unquenchable fire, the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, eternal punishment. The torment of Hades. Hell is real. We may not know exactly what it's like, but Jesus is warning us about it, warning us to take it seriously.

Let's start by taking a look at the rich man. There is nothing to suggest he did anything wrong. There's no mention that he hurt anyone, no mention of rape or murder or drug taking or lying. There's nothing about any specific sinful act. But as James 4:17 says *Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.* The only sin this man commits here is his self-centred neglect of others. This parable warns us that we all sin. This is not a parable about wealth – remember Abraham was very wealthy. We may not see ourselves as the rich man and perhaps some would think of ourselves more like Lazarus, in this life. But that's not the point of this parable, it's not about money. This parable reminds

us that we all sin and that the place sinners go is hell. And more than that, once there, there is no rescue.

This puts a different perspective on God's amazing grace that counts us as holy. His saving grace rescues us from hell.

We know we still sin and yet those who believe in our Lord Jesus Christ receive Christ's righteousness because he has taken our sins, past, present and future upon himself, when he died on the cross for us. We are saved from hell. Praise the Lord.

It also puts a different perspective on our friends and family who reject Christ. Yes, of course he gives everyone an opportunity to turn to him, a second, third, indeed many chances but this parable puts it clearly and plainly, that those who reject God don't just become nothing when they die, those who reject God will go to hell.

You see, Jesus says, those who reject God's kindness towards them in this life will continue to reject him even in hell. We see that even in the rich man's torment, he cries out to Abraham and not to God. He doesn't ask to be saved from the torment but just for his mouth to be moistened. He doesn't ask Abraham if he could be allowed into heaven. He doesn't repent of the sinful way he treated poor Lazarus. No, in fact he demands that Abraham should send Lazarus to serve him and bring water to him in hell.

Those who reject God in this life will continue to reject him in the next.

And when the rich man is told about the impassable chasm that divides them, he starts blaming Abraham for not making it plain enough when he was alive; suggesting that there wasn't enough proof of hell and that Abraham should send Lazarus back to warn his family. My friends, there is plenty God has revealed about hell. Just read Matthew chapters 8, 10, 13, 18, 23, 24, 25. Google 'Hell in the Bible' and you'll get over 70 million hits – not all reliable – and I would urge you to study the Bible. But please, if you're still wondering whether hell really exists, take a closer look in scripture. Jesus speaks clearly about hell because he wants to save us from it.

The final verse of our reading Jesus alludes to himself. *If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.* Jesus prophesies about his own impending death and resurrection.

He will endure hell for us on the cross to save us from it. No one need go to hell, unless they reject his sacrifice for them and decide stubbornly that they want to go it alone. I'm not advocating that we all go around wearing placards that say, 'Turn or Burn', but let us reflect on the reality of hell and the amazing grace of God who has saved us from it.

Let us pray,

Father we thank you for your sacrifice on the cross that has saved us from hell.

Help us to reflect on the enormity of what you have achieved for us.

We pray for those we know who need to meet with you and be saved.

Send your Spirit, Lord. Open ears and hearts. In the name of Jesus. Amen