

Gospel reading for Sunday 29th September 2019

[Luke 16:19-31](#)

Well what a beauty we have for this week's Reflections! We have landed arguably one of the most misunderstood and/or under-understood passages in the whole of the New Testament! **The parable of the rich man and Lazarus.**

Parable? What parable you might say? Where does it tell us that this is a parable? Frequently when a parable is told, we have the prelude something like ... *"Then Jesus told them this parable."* That's missing here. So first we need to face perhaps the most important question with regard to this text. Is it a literal story that is presented as something that has already happened or is it a parable of Jesus? I'll state right up front what I think. If you want to check the progression and wording through Luke 15:3, 15:8, 15:11, 16:1 finally to 16:19, it is easy to conclude that this is very definitely a parable and that makes a huge difference. Listening to it as a story that actually happened, has arguably given much of Christendom a rather warped view of heaven and hell and life after death – a view that is not at all helpful to us in the 21st Century. If it reassures you, I can tell you that Luther was convinced about this being a parable. Luther also went on to say that it **definitely should not be used as a text to tell us about life after death;** but I think we have probably done that over the years!

Note that if we interpret this as a literal story, we immediately get into strife. FOR EXAMPLE: Firstly, we have to deal with the implication that rich people go to hell and poor people go to heaven. Sure, Jesus has a lot to say (in context) to the rich and about the rich, but he is not for a moment saying to us today to go out and get poor or be a refugee or a beggar to assure ourselves of a place in heaven. That is very anti-gospel. Besides, Abraham was a VERY rich man, so what then is he doing in heaven?

So what's going on here? Let's look beyond the superficial fire and brimstone in an attempt to uncover the hidden gospel.

The following observations may be helpful:

1. Jesus is under attack and has been constantly so, since the start of the sequence in Luke 15.
2. Jesus is addressing the Jews, particularly the Scribes and Pharisees
3. He is trying to correct the widely held misconception that if you are wealthy you have been blessed by God, but if you are poor, then that is a sign of ungodliness or being cursed and punished by God.
4. The Jewish people were adamant that poor people were not going to heaven. Jesus has tipped that thinking upside down here.

For us to understand what Jesus is on about here, we need to have answers to the questions... Who is the rich man? Who is Lazarus?

The Rich man almost certainly represents the JEWISH PEOPLE in general – especially that upper echelon of people that Jesus is actually addressing. The give-away clues include fine purple linen (royalty), the language used; Father Abraham is a very Jewish term; Abraham was their hero. The five brothers - possibly the brothers of Judah and the sons of Jacob and Leah – (to sneak in a bit of OT background.)

So who is Lazarus then? Was this Jesus' friend and the man he raised from the dead? That is VERY DOUBTFUL! It is certainly implied in John 12 that the Lazarus that Jesus raised did not come from a poor environment. There is good reason to suggest that Lazarus is symbolic of the Gentiles (everyone other than the Jews.) Here's why. **Lazarus** (is Greek) for **Eliezer** (in Hebrew), who was a Gentile slave of Abraham! Check out the opening to [Genesis 15:1-5](#). So the Lazarus in the parable can be read as the GENTILE (Eliezer).

Jesus in his teaching agenda, is trying to teach the Jewish people:

1. The kingdom is available to all (not just the Jews)
2. Just because you are a Jew – don't think you are in!
3. Salvation is NOT obtained through anything that you do or accumulate.
4. Jesus is saying – **salvation is available to ALL** who place their trust in me.

A non-Jew getting into heaven? How can that possibly be? (No wonder Jesus got himself crucified!)

So what does this mean for us in 2019 as leaders in Lutheran schools and early childhood centres?

(Or how do we respond?)

This parable is another great example of God revealing to us how He thinks and acts. We could argue that this story is largely irrelevant to us! You see, there is the not so small matter of us having the benefit of **standing the other side of the cross!** It's a done deal. It is finished!

Our response should be to CELEBRATE! We can celebrate our understanding of God's grace, the fact that we have been told about Jesus and through knowing Him, we are invited to the party. We have guaranteed right of entry, the door has been thrown wide open to the biggest party ever. That's a cause for celebration!

Let's make sure that we get this message through to our staff, students and families.

We need have no fear of any undesirable alternative – thanks to God's unconditional love, and the new deal he has made with us through Jesus, we can fast forward over that story without any fears or anxieties. Sometimes we get so side-tracked and caught up in the scare tactics of some of Jesus' words to the Jews that we forget we are already at the party!

Nev