
Easter 5, Matins

Luke 16: 19-31

Petter Kringberg, Licensed Lay Minister, St Thomas', Kensal Town

Father, all those thoughts and words that come from Thee, wilt thou bless them and make them fruitful, and all those words that come not from Thee, but from our vanity, wilt Thou forgive. Amen.

Being, both by training and by profession, an accountant, I try and stay as far away as possible from my colleagues when it comes to choosing authors for the books I read for fun (I hope you don't blame me!). For a year or so during our various lockdowns, in honour of a then-recently deceased aunt (who was a Swedish Red Cross nurse who passed away just before the pandemic - and who trained under one of Florence Nightingale's best friends), I read quite a few memoirs written by nurses educated in the long-standing Matron system all across England.

One young Lancashire lass tells a story from the 1950s of her finding on the gurney in front of her in the A&E, one of the local vagrants. He was complaining, in the local tongue (which I, as a Swede, won't even attempt) that the ulcers on his leg were a bit "tickly". Nurse Prentiss did then discover (rather reluctantly, the book tells us) that the poor old man's leg ulcers were covered in maggots, and the House Officer she called on to take care of the matter was ecstatic - he could now go fishing when he finished his shift, having found baits presented to him in a kidney bowl, if not on a silver plate. The Ward Sister, as it happens, was quite happy too, as the wounds were all left very clean (it turns out that sterile maggots went on to become part of wound care in the 60s and 70s)!

Continuing to talk about wounds - and I do hope (somewhat belatedly) that no-one is squeamish, let's look into our NT reading for today, from the Gospel of the one Evangelist tradition tells us was a physician: Luke wrote that "Dogs even used to come and lick his sores." Admittedly, the grammatical construction of what we read as "even" in English, in the Greek can be translated (those trained in biblical Greek tell me) as "worst of all" dogs would lick his sores. However, the ancients knew when a dog licks a person's sores or wounds, healing occurs more rapidly. The licking cleans the wound and the saliva acts as a disinfectant. At the Ashkelon dog cemetery in Israel (predating Christianity with some 500 years), over a thousand dogs are buried in individual plots. The dogs were trained to lick the wounds or sores of humans, in exchange for a fee. Much like the Lancashire maggots, the biblical dogs were helpful!

So in Luke 16:21, where it says that dogs licked the wounds of Lazarus, this is the biblical basis for therapy dogs, as American playwright and Dominican friar Peter John Cameron, claims. Yet Lazarus was a man with unfulfilled desires "longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table". When he died, he was left unburied. Lazarus did not even have a decent burial by human beings, which is what "carried away by angels" means.

One scholar, McGee notes: *“When the beggar died, there was no funeral. They just took his body out and threw it into the Valley of Gehenna where garbage was dumped and burned, or maybe his body was dumped into a pauper’s grave.”*

The bosom of Abraham in [Luke 16:22](#) is literally described as a pocket-like fold in a garment; gathered up by an affectionate parent or like a kangaroo Joey resting in the pouch of his mother, as it were. By God’s grace, the poor may enter heaven in virtue of their poverty, and the rich by sharing their wealth, all by God’s grace. Pope Saint John Paul II connected the rich man as rich countries that drain most of the world’s energy and raw materials that are meant to serve the whole of humanity, saying that the solution is fair trade and solidarity between peoples. No one is condemned in the Bible for simply being wealthy, only those who did not share and help others. After all, Saint Augustine noted centuries ago that Lazarus was welcomed into paradise by Abraham, who was one of the richest people on earth when Abraham lived in the world.

Many years ago there was published a poem (in the US) which illustrates in a beautiful way the spirit of Christian charity. It was the day before Thanksgiving Day, and a man who was feeling very grateful and happy decided to send a turkey to one of his neighbours. This neighbour upon receiving the turkey was very happy and decided to send the chicken which he and his family had planned to have for Thanksgiving dinner to another neighbour who was poorer still. This neighbour upon receiving the chicken manifested the same spirit and gave a pumpkin pie to another neighbour who was very poor. This person was filled with the charitable spirit and sent a loaf of bread to a very poor family. They rejoiced in the gift which they had received and after eating most of the bread they gave the crumbs to the birds which gave beautiful music back to them and to the world. The gift of one man awakened the charitable spirit in many, and each person gave not to the person from whom he had received but to someone else who was in greater need, and all received a blessing - (and might that tell us something about Stewardship and how we see our contribution to the Church a part of our regular worship?)

The rich man wanted to warn his five brothers so they don’t also end up in this place of torment, saying, *‘Then I beg you, father, send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment’* and Abraham replied that *‘They have Moses and the prophets’* to warn them. Someone has said that this is the only prayer in the Bible addressed to a saint that was not answered.

Then, the rich man said, *‘Oh no, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’* The rich man was implying that the Scriptures are a distant and irrelevant book for the five brothers, and the rich man’s request for a sign instead is an evasion and an expression of impenitence or a lack of repentance and contrition.

The damned sinned through the five senses, therefore they suffer through all five of the senses. The punishment in Hell is in proportion to the guilt. The Worst Suffering in Hell is the sense of loss of God and heaven.

HOWEVER, what you and I can put all our trust in, is the final verse of the Gospel passage - "*though one rose from the dead*". Four weeks ago we heard how Christ, who died on the Cross for our sins, conquered death and rose again. Four weeks ago we were shown just how wide the Father's love for us is (to paraphrase the old hymn), that He gave His only Son to die to redeem the sins of all of us. So, we can take our comfort in the fact of that self-same Easter miracle, and rest in the promises that through this amazing sacrifice, the rich man's brothers - and you and I - will not have to come to this place of torment, not because of Moses' warnings, but because God loved them at the time, and God loves us today and Jesus died on the Cross to ensure that our sins are forgiven, and, in this Eastertide, that He is risen indeed, Alleluia. Amen.