

“What is God’s blessing?” Luke16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, 23 and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. 24 And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' 25 But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' 27 And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house-- 28 for I have five brothers-- so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' 29 But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' 30 And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31 He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'”

Today we read one more of Jesus parables. The parable about a rich man and Lazarus. It is amazing how many of Jesus parables deal in one way or another with money and possessions. Some scholars say that two thirds of all Jesus parables touch on these issues at least somehow.

Today for our meditations we have one of these parables. Again, it is so saturated with a meaning that we’ll pick just one topic and will try to understand what Jesus is teaching about it.

What is this topic? We’ll discuss what is God’s blessing and what is not. Sometimes we are confused regarding it. But before we start to delve into this questions, we have to take a closer look at what Jesus tells us in this parable. How would His listeners hear it?

When Jesus had finished the parable about the unjust steward he concluded that „no servant can serve two masters [...] you cannot serve God and money.” But the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.”

Then Jesus told them this story. „There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.” One sentence, but it tells us a lot about this person. Of course, he was rich. Very rich. Purple was very expensive. Only truly wealthy people

could afford to wear it. But this man wore it every day, so that everyone can see how much money he had.

Besides purple, he used fine linen. That's almost ironic. Greek word for fine linen indicates material that was used for the finest underwear. So, if anyone was interested, he not just wore purple, but also the most expensive underwear.

Besides he feasted sumptuously every day. What does it tell? For one thing, that he didn't keep the Sabbath. Perhaps he thought that his riches give him everything he needed. At least in his mind there was no need for God. He already had everything...

Also his servants couldn't have a day off as instructed by God through Moses. At the same time, as we read, he knew Abraham and considered himself his descendant. Translating it into today's situation, he would probably consider himself a Christian.

"At his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores." The rich man had not just doors, but obviously also garden with fence and gates. Lazarus *was laid* at his gate. Lazarus was not coming to lay at his gate himself. He was that sick that he was carried, probably by his relatives or friends. The rich man was covered with purple and fine linen, Lazarus, on the other hand, was covered with sores.

He "desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table, and the dogs came and licked his sores." Where else to bring this poor man, if not to the place where feasts were going on every day? It was common to give something to beggars, and that was Lazarus hope, that he may get at least some of the leftovers.

Probably he got a little bit, otherwise it would be meaningless to carry him there, but he didn't get enough for he was still hungry. On the one hand, the feast every day, on the other hand, just a few meters away, the other guy was starving.

Even dogs were more compassionate than the rich man. In Ancient Middle East dogs were not pets. They were used as guards and sometimes for healing purposes. Since ancient times people always knew that dogs' saliva has a healing effect.

In this story not the rich man, or his friends and relatives, but his guardian dogs are the most compassionate beings. The rich man didn't gave even for Lazarus provision, dogs, on the other hand, were friendly to him and did what they could to heal him.

"The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried." There is not a word about Lazarus funeral, but nevertheless – the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man was buried, perhaps with the same splendour as he used to live.

And then we get to the another stage in this story. “In Hades, [that’s a name for hell] being in torment, he [the rich man] lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’”

The most striking is not the fact that Lazarus is at Abraham’s side, and not the fact that the rich man was in hell. The most striking is what he says, how he says it and what it reveals about him. ‘Father Abraham, send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue!’”

He knows Abraham. He considers himself his child. But he also knows Lazarus. He knows His name. And then it comes. Incredible arrogance. Of course, the rich man sees where he is and where Lazarus is. He is in hell, and Lazarus is as a guest of honour in Abraham’s heavenly feast.

Regardless of that, there is not a single shade of repentance. Quite contrary, he asks to send Lazarus to serve him, to help him. Besides, he doesn’t even speak with Lazarus, probably he is not talking to beggars. He is talking only with people with a certain status.

It is like saying: “Abraham, send this beggar Lazarus to take care of me. I really don’t feel too good being here.” Abraham’s answer is amazing. He is patience and kind, he calls this man ‘child’. This Greek word even permits translation ‘my child’. But then he says that there is a great chasm between them, that those who would pass over, may not be able.

Those who would? What is Abraham suggesting? There is only Lazarus mentioned in this story. It seems that Abraham is suggesting the Lazarus would listen to the rich man’s plea and would go to help him, but he can’t because of this great chasm.

But the rich man can’t stop. “OK, if Lazarus can’t come to me, send him to my brothers to warn them.” It seems that the rich man is concerned with his family for they may be living the same lifestyle as he did.

He wants to use Lazarus by all means. For he is the rich man, and Lazarus, who is he, just a beggar. It seems that in his arrogance he doesn’t realize how things are now. He does not command everyone anymore.

Abraham’s answer is ‘no’ again. Instead he says: “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.” What Abraham was saying: “They have the Scriptures, they can listen to what God is telling them through Moses and through prophets.” If only they were in synagogue, where the Scriptures were read. There they would here all what they needed... all that God was telling them. But if you feast every day... there is not time.

But the rich man continues to argue with Abraham. No, no, you are not right, Abraham! Send them Lazarus, if someone returns from the dead, then they will believe. But Abraham’s

answer remains unchanged: “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”

This much about the parable. Now we’ll try to answer our question, what is God’s blessing and what is not. People often assume that God’s blessing is when we get what we want. And usually we want exactly what the rich guy had.

Think about this story: who seems to be blessed by God? One guy had everything, other had nothing, not even health, not even the ability to move around. Who of them seemed to be blessed? I guess it is not a difficult question to answer. Of course, the rich man, who had super-abundance of everything.

But is this what the story reveals? Let’s look closer at the rich man. Having feasts every day? What does it tell? ‘Feast’ – it sounds quite positive, right? What if we call it a party? That would be more fitting in today’s language.

He was partying every day. What does this mean? I assume most of us would have had a party where we had a little... too much of everything. And if we also happen to have done something wrong, how do we feel on the another day? So and so...

How would we feel having been partying for a long time? What happens when you party very often? You become more and more obtuse. You need more and more excitement to make you feel good. What worked yesterday, doesn’t work today anymore.

Your need more and more diversity in food and in entertainment. What would parties look like in this rich man’s house, where they had them every day? I’m not sure if we can fully imagine it.

How would the rich man feel like after these parties? When you have had enough, and then more and more, and thus for many days... in mornings you’d feel dirty not just from outside, but from inside as well. Then you need to put on beautiful purple clothes to hide your inner state from others and from yourself.

We can make idol from anything. It seems that the rich man was trying to find his life’s meaning and fulfilment in partying. In new and new, more and more intensive pleasures. When you expect your idols to give you joy and meaning, they require from you more and more and more... and they never, never give you what you desire.

But the more you invest in your idols, the more focused on them you become. Where is your treasure, there is your heart. The rich man was partying every day trying to find what only God can give. Peace, joy, and fulfilment. He already didn’t see other people around. He didn’t care. He knew about Lazarus, but was so busy searching for meaning in physical pleasures, that nothing else existed for him.

When he found himself in hell, may be it wasn't that different for him? He was thirsty and insatiable during his life. He was so overwhelmed with his idols and himself that he didn't care about others, that he didn't see reality as it was. As we read, His experience in hell didn't seem to be very different. Right?

Just think how many Australians have feasts every day, Sundays included. Not in a sense that they are partying. But doing something that they can afford and that would bring meaning and joy. Their days are filled doing it intensely, there is no time left for neighbour or for God. They are not much different that the rich man in the parable.

This parable is not about the principle that if you have a good life here, you'll burn in the hell, and if you suffer in this life you will go to the paradise. It is not to show that to have abundantly is bad, and to have nothing is good. No, not at all.

We have many times talked about it. God Creator delights in giving us His gifts. Creation is good and prosperity is good. To have a lot, it can be seen as a wonderful blessing of God, if only we are capable of using our possessions as our Lord intended. First, receiving them with grateful heart, then serving others, for the good of community.

The rich man had received a lot, we can say that he was blessed in a sense that God had entrusted him a lot. But instead of being a blessing, his possession had become for him a deadly snare. They didn't bring any good neither to him, nor to others.

People tend to ask, is there a life after the death, but they should ask instead, is there a life before the death? Was there a life for the rich man? Is there a life for many, who have plenty, but don't have what only God can give. True peace, true joy. God had been gracious to the rich man, but his possession, his idols of physical pleasure had overcome him, blinding him and robbing him of his life.

What Jesus is showing, that money and possessions on their own can't bring you joy and peace. They can be a blessing, but they can be also a curse. The difference is made by our hearts, whether we know and trust true God, or not.

What about Lazarus? A beggar, who can't even walk. Not exactly the standard according which we'd measure God's blessings. However, remember, with this parable Jesus is addressing the Pharisees who were lovers of money.

There are few marvellous things about Lazarus. He is the only person in the parables of Jesus, who is called by name. The only one! And his name in Hebrew means 'the one whom God helps'. This rich man is just a rich man. But Lazarus is called by his name.

There are few things we can learn about Lazarus. Whatever was his life story, he was content with what he had. He obviously was kind and grateful with his relatives or friends, so

they kept helping him. He wasn't complaining for what he didn't have, but trusted the Lord and lived in peace. He made friends even with dogs of the rich man. Even they tried to help him.

When Lazarus was at Abraham's side, even then he was ready to go and help the rich man. No bitterness, no bad memories; if he needed Lazarus help, he was ready to give it. We can meet people like Lazarus among us. They are in peace. They are not worried. They are content. They may be in the midst of sufferings and affliction, but it seems they draw power and peace from some secret source, despite the harshness of reality.

What is that that enabled Lazarus to be in such a peace? We often think that true blessings are something we possess, something outside us. We worry to get them, we worry to keep and protect them. In Lazarus case, as well as in the case with Job in the Old Testament, their content and peace came from this secret source. From their trust in true God.

Love your God with all your heart with all your mind and with all your strength! Love Him for His sake, not for goodies we receive from Him. When you have Him, all the other things are ... just other things. Of course, we may ask, how can we do it? It is much easier to love and desire 'visible blessing' than to love God.

How can we have this peace? How can we love our Lord more than anything, especially when life is not going as we'd want it to go, when we happen to be in situations similar to Lazarus.

Look at Christ! Think about Him! He had everything. Much more than the rich man. But He chose to empty Himself, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. "He was rich, yet for *your* sake he became poor, so that *you* by his poverty might become rich." (2Co 8:9)

What Christ did, changed this world. Literally. Enormous prosperity that we enjoy today, it is a direct result of Christ sacrifice for us. Jesus love throughout the millennia changed hearts of many, enabling them to live for others, to use what God had given them to enhance the community. That created our culture. We enjoy the fruits of Jesus love in our lives on every step. Even not knowing.

Besides, Jesus came back from the dead Himself, to assure us that the heavenly feast is prepared for us. Look at his love to you! He loves you first. When we realize it, when the Holy Spirit assures us, it gives us what we need the most. Peace that passes all human understanding. This is true blessing of God. To have Him, our Lord and Saviour, who gave everything He had, to be with you.

Amen.