

“How to cross the chasm?” Luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he 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.” 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. 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.” And he said, “Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house-- for I have five brothers-- so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.” But Abraham said, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.” And he said, “No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” 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's Gospel reading is one of these challenging readings which raises many hard questions. Which questions did it raise in your minds? For one, here Jesus speaks about the reality of hell.

For He is the One who came to save us from... remind me, to save us from what? Yes, from sin, judgment and hell. But this is not the only hard question that can come into our minds. There are others as well. Is it bad to be rich?

Is it good to be poor? Have I been generous enough, or have I used God's gifts mostly for myself like the rich man? Have I ignored the needs of those whom God had placed near me? If I suffer in this life, like Lazarus, does it mean I will be blessed in the next?

However, for our meditations today, I would like to suggest that this reading helps us to see the difference between two kinds of people. Between those who love God and listen to Him, and between those who hate God and want to be like gods themselves. For this is how God Himself divides all people in these two groups, – those who love Him and keep His commandments, and those who hate Him.

Let's take a look at the two main characters in today's reading, the rich man and Lazarus. What can we learn about them, and how does it help to see the difference between those who listen to God, and those who don't.

Let's go with the rich man first. What was his main problem, what do you think? Money? Possessions? Affluence? Desire to have fun? Neglect of the poor? His main problem was that he had turned his back to God. He was seeking what only the Creator can give in created things.

Money in itself is good. Possessions – good. Affluence – good. Desire to have fun – good. All of these are good gifts of our generous God. The problem begins when we expect from these good gifts of our Creator, what only He can give.

What do I mean? You see, God has created us for a particular life. To live in loving relationships with Him, trusting Him, receiving everything from His with gratitude, and serving with all our God given gifts to our neighbours, to people in our lives.

What did the rich man do? What did he love the most? It seems that he had embraced the same ideas that we so often hear today, - the purpose of your life is to be happy. Go for it! You deserve it!

So he did as much as he could to accomplish this goal. Instead of loving God and his neighbour, he loved himself. Instead in trusting God above all things, he trusted his possessions.

Instead of searching for meaning and joy and peace living according to God's design, he was trying to find meaning and joy and fulfillment in ongoing parties. Every day... from day to day.

Do you think he found his happiness? When you search for meaning, and joy and fulfillment in wrong places, you can never find them. This is why he had to try so hard from day to day. It is exhausting.

There was no time for him to experience the Sabbath rest. There was no time for him to listen as His God was speaking to Him in His Word. He was too busy. Too focused on himself. Busy with the important stuff... there was not time for God. How many today are similarly busy searching for happiness in wrong places?

And then he died and found himself in hell. You know what is so surprising? He hadn't change. What had changed was that God's good gifts were taken away, but otherwise not much had changed.

He was still as thirsty as he was in this life. He was still as arrogant as he was in this life, it was all about him. "I am thirsty, send Lazarus to help me!" In his mind he was still who he used to be – the rich man. The ruler of his life.

We can't see in him any sign of repentance, or regret that he had failed to do what God created him to do. He was still caring only about himself and his brothers, perhaps, unrepentant men similar to him.

If you reject God in this life, if you are arrogant and rebellious towards Him, if you want to be like god yourself, if you have no time to listen to Him and to come where He invites you is this life, if there is no repentance here, nothing will change in the life to come.

What we choose here, we choose for the eternity. If we want to be separated from God, and we have this scary freedom to reject Him, we will be separated from Him and from all His good gifts as well. And there will be no way back.

I just want to add, that this in no way applies to the rich only. It applies to anyone who expects to find their identity, meaning, joy, peace, and so on in created things.

You may have nothing, neither possession, nor status, nor achievements, but if you believe that these things will give you happiness, if you trust that they will fill your life with meaning and joy and grant you security, you are by no means better than the rich man. It is not about our possessions, it is about a state of our hearts.

And on the other hand, you don't have to be poor and sick to trust God as your heavenly Father, to listen to His Word and strive to lead your life according to His will. You may as well have abundance of God's blessings, and to use them generously for the benefit of many.

Now, let's look at Lazarus. If the rich man is simply called a rich man, for that was his identity, then Lazarus is the only one who is called by name in all parables of Jesus.

The name Lazarus comes from Hebrew Eliezer, which means "the one to whom God helps". This is who he is – the one to whom God Himself helps. We can learn that Lazarus is humble, kind and patient man.

Even in this brief story we can see God's presence with Him. He has his friends who every day carry him to the house of the rich man. He probably gets there something to eat, but not enough.

Even dogs are friendly to Lazarus. In Ancient Middle East dogs often were used for healing. These dogs probably were guard dogs in the rich man's house, but even they showed their compassion to this kind man, helping him as much as they could, in this case, licking his sores so that he would get better.

The thing is, that despite of what this world tries to teach us, affluence doesn't grant happiness, and peace, neither in this world nor in the one to come. God's presence does.

Similarly sufferings and hardship in this life is not a sign that God has abandoned someone, quite contrary, He can be and so often is with us especially in the midst of our struggles. I know that many of you have experienced it in your own lives.

Then Lazarus is carried in Abraham's bosom. And as the Abraham explains to the rich man, now Lazarus is comforted. Thus it becomes clear that hunger and even his sickness were not the main causes of Lazarus sufferings, for Abraham doesn't say that now Lazarus is fed and healed.

Rather his sufferings were related with the mourning over the injustice, greed, self-centeredness and indifference that Lazarus witnessed from so many in this world. As Jesus said in the Sermon of Mount: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." (Mt 5:4)

And we can see more heart-warming things about Lazarus. When he was in Abrahams bosom, and when the rich man arrogantly asked to send Lazarus to serve him, Abraham responded.

"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..." There is no one else to refer to, but Lazarus. It seems that he would be willing to walk the distance to help the rich man in his suffering, but he couldn't.

Here we have a guy who does what Jesus told all of us to do: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Mt 5:44) And Paul the apostle adds: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom 12:21)

And again, as with the rich man, we can see that Lazarus was the same humble and kind man that he used to be in this life. He trusted His Lord and Saviour in this life, and God of comfort and peace was with Him even in the midst of His sufferings.

And now He was in the presence of His Lord. The only radical change was that all His sufferings and pain were gone, all injustice and indifference were gone.

But there is one more aspect, one more very important change that happens when someone moves from this life to the life to come. And it is this – once someone pass away from this life, they can't hear the Gospel of forgiveness anymore.

Remember, I said that the big difference between these two men was that one was listening to God and putting his trust in God alone, and the other wasn't. The rich man had no time for His Creator and Saviour.

Only being eternally separated from God he commanded Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers, who probably lived similar lifestyle, to warn them about what is to come, so that they could repent and turn to God for forgiveness. And what did Abraham respond to him? Remember?

"They have Moses and prophets. If they don't listen to the Word of God, then it won't matter even if someone returns from the dead." People often misunderstand what Christians mean by faith.

It is not something that we can choose, looking at evidence, or seeing miracles. There was another Lazarus, and Jesus raised him from the dead. And all the religious leaders knew about it. What was their reaction?

Were they convinced that Jesus was the Son of God. No! They decided to kill Lazarus and to kill Jesus. Then Jesus Himself rouse from the dead. So what? Did it persuade many? Not at all.

What Jesus Himself teaches us in this parable is that only the Word of God, His message of Law and Gospel, of God's demands and His unconditional grace, only this message can change our hearts and create true faith.

Christian faith is not something we can be argued into. Faith is not even the knowledge that there is some kind of higher being. All people have that. Demons have that. The rich man had that. Christian faith is a gift of gracious God.

Your faith is a creation of the Holy Spirit, it is a miracle in itself. Your trust in Jesus is a result of the work of the Holy Spirit, and His presence with you. It is by His presence with us and in us that the Holy Spirit unites us with God the Father and Jesus and with one another.

This is true faith when the Holy Spirit assures you that God is your Father and you are His beloved child, that Jesus died for you, and that He rouse again for you, and that He has gone to prepare the place for you, and that He will come and will take you to be with Him in His Father's kingdom.

And you know how the Holy Spirit creates this faith, right? When you listen to your God speaking to you. Reading the Bible, listening to preaching, in home devotions and in Bible studies, in Christian conversations when you comfort and encourage one another with the Gospel of Jesus.

This is the big thing to be reminded today. Nothing else can create true faith. We can all bend backwards, we can try to befriend people by giving them what they demand, but there is only one way people can move across this great chasm that separates God's people from those who want to be like gods themselves; and that is – when we speak to them the life-giving message that Jesus has entrusted to us.

“Repent and believe in the Gospel.” Nothing else will do. May the Holy Spirit, the Creator of faith Himself lead you and guide you as you pray and engage with those who are still lost, and who desperately need God's grace.

And peace of God, that surpasses all human understanding, keep your minds and hearts in Jesus Christ. Amen.