LAZARUS VINDICATED: A CALL FOR COMPASSION AND JUSTICE

St. Barts, September 28 2025

“As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainly of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”

Thus advises the author of 1 Timothy – a pastoral epistle whose authorship is disputed, but makes clear that our economic life is one that involves a sacred contract among all involved. This idea is similar to what we heard from the prophet Jeremiah in the purchase of the field a Anathoth. Economic relationships have spiritual, moral and ethical implications.

There’s an old folk song that has been recorded and popularized by singers as diverse as Hank Williams and Joan Baez. “Tramp on the Street” was written by songwriters Grady and Hazel Cole, who first recorded it in 1939. While the Coles adapted the lyrics, the song's history is traced back to an 1877 poem titled "Only a Tramp" and the biblical parable of Lazarus and the rich man.

Follow along and listen to this version recorded by Jesse Milnes and Emily Miller:

(Play song)

Luke 16: 19-31 records one of the most fascinating and theologically argued over parables of Jesus. One character is even given a name. One thing this parable is not, is a literal teaching about the fate of humans after death. The basic story would have been familiar to Jesus’ audience. There are Jewish versions, as well as Egyptian and Greco-Roman versions. Simply put, a rich man and a poor man die at the same time and in an after-life experience a reversal of fortune. We’re all familiar with Dickens’ Christmas Carol. The rich haughty Scrooge ignores the needs of those around him and comes to a new realization about the use of his earthy riches. The difference in Dickens’ story is that there is a timely transformation of the human heart. Love and family are celebrated, and Tiny Tim will live to see many more Christmases.

The rich man in Jesus’ parable is sometimes called “Dives” , derived from the Latin word for “rich”. He is obviously of high station – a purple clad ruler, a person of power and prestige. He’s the privileged one blinded by his own wealth and station, perhaps a royal office bearer or religious leader – of the Judean upper crust.

Then we have Lazarus, the one Jesus specifically names. Lazarus is a Hebrew short form for the name Eleazar, meaning “God helps”. In the end, it is affirmed by Jesus that God helps the completely helpless in the context of compassion and justice.

It is of note that Jesus provides the oddly specific detail that this rich man has “a father and five brothers”. It’s a wonderful not-so-veiled reference to the high priestly family of Jesus’ time – Caiaphas and his father-in law Annas who each had five sons. They are supposedly the keepers of the laws of Moses and the teachings of the prophets, but do not follow the precepts therein. They live in their “gated” home, spurning justice and compassion for those in need. Even if someone came back from the dead, these particular rulers are so stubborn that they would still refuse to change. Of equal significance, is that this rich and ruling class, descendants of the tribe of Judah, spring from the son of Jacob, Judah, founder of the Tribe of Judah, who also had five sons. So Jesus at once refers to both the secular and religious leadership of his time.

Thus Jesus neatly sums up the failure of the economic and religious leaders of his day. There is indeed a great gulf between the “haves” and the “have-nots”. According to Mosaic law, Deut. 15:7 states that “you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother”.

Ezekiel reminds the leaders of his day , “Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Shouldn’t the shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, and you clothe you with the wool, you kill the fatlings; but you don’t feed the sheep”.

So God is on the side of those in need, and of those who meet those needs. Such is the reign of God introduced in Jesus. And who is Lazarus/Eleazer? Jesus is most likely referring to Eleazar of Damascus of the household of Abraham. He was a gentile and a steward; in fact, the chief steward of Abraham, faithful to managing Abraham’s affairs. So Jesus is reminding his listeners that the true and faithful stewards, those who recognize the spiritual and ethical dimensions of our economic and community life together, have been disinherited by the sin of the “great gulf” that leads to social inequality and injustice.

So Jesus is not referring to a literal ‘heaven’ or ‘hell’ of eternal torment here. He’s emphasizing the states that humanity creates for itself. Heaven and hades are symbolic here. The geography of the afterlife is not important. It is overly simplistic. Heaven and hell appear to be adjacent to one another, separated only by a wide chasm. They are so close that Abraham and this rich man can carry on a lengthy conversation, and a drop of water would not ease the man in torment. It’s wonderful figurative and visual language that Jesus uses to make a key statement about compassion and justice. It’s about the sacredness of the economic and spiritual ties that bind us all as made in God’s image. It's about our duty to care, and tear down the walls, or gates, or gulfs that divide us into various ‘classes’ of people. It hints at equality between Jew and gentile.

The BC Union of Municipalities convention this week again expressed our general frustration with the rising crisis of street disorder, homelessness, and poverty which represent the gulf we have allowed to widen among us. Mayors are calling for additional resources; needs must be met, and solutions are not simple. As the mayor of Victoria pointed out, “there are a lot of ‘gaps’ in service provisions and availability in social services, health services, housing and other areas, which all need to come together much, much faster.” Maybe taking Jesus seriously would represent a step in the right direction.

We take Jesus seriously when we help fill the gap – in our own daily ministries to people around us, through our food bank, community garden and hot lunch programmes. Through ministry in the community, we proclaim, “Jesus is Lord”. We are blessed to be a blessing to others, upholding the sacred economic and social contract that Jeremiah, the writer of 1 Timothy, and this dramatic parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man remind us of.

If Jesus should come and knock at your door  
And asked to come in or to eat from your store  
Would you let him come in and invite him to eat  
Would you leave him to die like a tramp on the street.

Amen.