

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

PROPER 21

SUNDAY 29 SEPTEMBER 2013

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Jeremiah 32: 1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 146; Luke 16: 19-31; 1 Timothy 6: 17-20

“Hope for the Future?”

A rabbi asks a rich man to look out of his window and tell him what he sees. “Rich people, men, women, children, and also poor people, beggars, and tramps.” he says. “Now look in the mirror” the rabbi says, “what do you see now?” “Myself, obviously” the rich man answers. “Exactly”, the rabbi says, “the window is made of glass, and so is the mirror, but covered with a thin layer of silver - suddenly the only thing you will see is yourself....”

The rich man in the parable for this Sunday only sees himself. When he is alive, but also when he is dead. The layer of silver that covers his existence has cut him off from those around him, and has made it impossible to see what is going on outside.

Lazarus lies at his door. His name means “God helps”. The rich man knows he is there, as we discover later, he even knows his name, but he doesn’t “see” him. Believing he doesn’t need “God’s help”, Lazarus is left outside, covered in sores.

This rich man would have had a good excuse for this. In Deuteronomy 28 we read: "If you will obey the Lord your God...these blessings will come upon you." And the verses that follow describe wondrous blessings in city and field, fruits of the ground, increase in cattle and flocks--a glorious prosperity gospel! The rest of the chapter is filled with curses, curses that will come upon those who do not obey God. These curses are direct reversals of the blessings--devastation and destruction, blight and mildew, pestilence and plague. Listen carefully to one particular curse: "The Lord will strike you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head." (Deut. 28: 35)

Obviously Lazarus, or his family, must have done something wrong for him to end up where he is. The blessing of the Lord is clearly with the rich man, who, according to this view, must have been doing something right. He probably attended synagogue every Saturday, following the laws of Moses to the letter. He might even have been a great supporter of multiple charities on a regular basis.

But he doesn’t see Lazarus, the man with “God helps” written all over him, right in front of his porch.

In the same book of Deuteronomy there is another text: "You shall open wide your hand to your brothers and sisters, to the needy and to the poor..." (Deut. 15: 7-11) This was not a weak voice, but one that was steady and strong as the one in chapter 28, reminding people to leave grain at the edges of the fields for the poor, the widow, the sojourner. This voice became even stronger in the writings of the prophets such as Amos and Jeremiah and Isaiah.

If the rich man was pious enough to regard his blessing as God’s work, he probably would have known this text too. And most likely he would have tried his best to pay heed to it.

But he doesn’t see Lazarus, and God’s help, as it is lying right outside his window.

He can’t see.

The scene that unfolds in the realms of the afterlife shows this clearly.

He still doesn't see!

He calls on Abraham, someone he clearly considers to be on the same plane with him, to send Lazarus to bring him a bit of water. It doesn't even occur to him to address Lazarus and ask him. Lazarus is still, to him, very much the inferior, "not on the same plane" person he was before and is still not taken seriously as a fellow human being capable of embodying God's help.

There are all sorts of echoes playing in the background here. Living water being one of them. The rich man needs water, living water, and it needs to come from the other side of a chasm that is too wide even for Abraham to cross. Lazarus, "God helps", at Abraham's side, can't cross the great divide death has brought. And the rich man is stuck where he is, thirsty and in agony. He may have had a good time while he was ignoring "God helps" outside his window, in the end it hasn't taken him to Abraham's side. On the contrary.

When he starts to think about others, even in his agony, his eyes still don't roam much further than what he can see in the mirror. His father's house, his brothers, they need warning that it may pay to look out and take seriously even those who may seem cursed by God as people deserving of God's help. Can you hear how he is still trying to save his own skin? The skin of his family? The agony of hell fire has not changed this man. Seeing God's help (Lazarus) at Abraham's side has not changed this man. Moses and the prophets have not changed this man. As they won't change his brothers. As won't someone rising from the dead.

Again the sting of this parable is in the tail. When your window is covered with silver, the parable says, not even someone rising from the dead will change you or your view of the world. But instead your life will end up in torment till eternity.

Apparently this has now been backed up by good, hard, statistical evidence. There is an optimum amount of income that will make people happy. If they get less they will be obsessed and anxious, but if they get more they will become equally or even more obsessed and anxious. With people earning above the optimum sharing generously from their surplus the happiest people in town.

What happens when silver, when money, starts covering up our view of the world outside our immediate inner circle of life can be seen not only in the lives of many individuals in our affluent society, it can be seen at work in politics at the moment, as well as in the life of the Church. When money takes centre stage, the shutters come down on others, on compassion, on care, on love, on respect, on "God helps" and we all too easily go into self preservation mode, with saving our own skin the main focus of our thinking, no matter how much wealth we may still have to share from.

I won't go into national politics and spin around asylum seeker issues and cut backs on mental health and higher education. No politics in the pulpit!

And I won't even go into what I see "Special Circumstances" do to our Church in that respect. Money has suspended our being Church someone said the other day. For the duration of "Special Circumstances" we seem to have given ourselves permission to put being Church on hold. Stop caring for each other, stop communicating, stop inter-conciliatory decision making, and focus on survival and survival alone. And we do. Not only at synod level. The whole Church is infected by it! What will "they" take? Will it affect "us"? How will "we" be, our congregation, our agency, our interests, after next week?

Over the last few weeks I have been tempted to take off my robes and put them away somewhere out of sight. I have found it difficult to be representing a Church that suddenly seems to have shrunk to what it can see in the mirror. A church where communication and care have been sacrificed to money and the self preservation of the institution. In my understanding that is not, and can never be, what the gospel is about. I've felt tainted, with my robes a visible sign of belonging to a larger body I found difficult to respect or represent.

Until I read Jeremiah this week, against the backdrop of the parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus. With Jerusalem under siege, what happens to Jeremiah is, as I have discovered, what happens to anyone who disagrees with authority trying to put a positive spin on a negative situation. With the Babylonians at the gate, Jeremiah has had the temerity to suggest the city will fall and the country laid waste. And that is, in the eyes of King Zedekiah, negative thinking and undermining morality.

I don't know if King Zedekiah and his council had invented the idea of seeing the siege as "an encouragement to pull together and an opportunity to creatively re-imagine Jerusalemite society", but I am sure they must have come up with something similar. All is well! God will help us! That is what they told their people. It is what we are told right now. Just a little bit of creative re-imagining going on here....

They isolate Jeremiah, put him in jail. We can't have negative thinking while others are busy trying to put a positive spin on things! It will only create panic and undermine morality.

If I'd been Jeremiah I'd have left them to their own devices I think. Taken off my prophets mantle and turned around in disgust. And I know of people who are considering doing just that in our Church. Withdraw their membership, leave, turn away, and as I said, I have felt, and still feel tempted to do just that.

Not Jeremiah! I imagine him putting on his prophet's robes with a sigh and some resistance to what is, inescapable, his call. With the Babylonians at the gate, knowing, as no other in Jerusalem, that the end is near and the whole country will be laid waste with years of hardship and exile to come, Jeremiah does not batten down the hatches, nor bury the money he has put somewhere safe to possibly save his skin at a later date. Jeremiah buys a plot of land, just outside the gates, in occupied territory.

Useless! Why on earth would you bother! He won't be able to work it, it won't bring him any gain or profit, it won't produce anything to harvest, and even if it did he wouldn't be able to get to it. It's a useless piece of real estate he is investing in!

And yet, this deed, this paradoxical act has echoed through the ages as an example of a faith that refuses to be defeated even in the face of the direst of circumstances.

The land will be laid waste, the Kingdom will perish, all of us will be taken away from our traditions and the lands and the environment that is familiar to us, says Jeremiah, but I refuse to believe that that will be the end. There is life after death. And I trust me or my family will be there to see it.

That is very different from the "Shush, God will save us, all will be well" the authorities have tried to make him preach. It is faith in full view and acceptance of impending devastation and destruction, blight and mildew, pestilence and plague. And still refusing to take off the robes of faith, of resurrection.

Someone has risen from the dead for us. We can wipe the silver of the window and look at what is out there. Fair and square. God's help waits at our doors, looking to see what we might do to close the gap. Compassion, care, communication, community, acceptance of one another as people invited to Abraham's side to find eternal life by sharing and caring, by respecting each other and keeping each other safe, by offering healing and hope wherever we go.

We've got more than we need, and God's call is to share it with those we can see if we stop looking inwards and being obsessed, anxious and fearful about what the future may hold. Our future is in God's hands, and even if devastation and destruction comes our way, it is still worth investing what we have, because what may be the end of us, will not be, will never be, the end of him who rose from the dead.

Amen.