

Sermon Sunday 25 September 2016 Luke 16. 19 to end. 1 Timothy 6. 6-19

As Christians we talk a fair bit about Heaven, Hell, Life after Death,, Judgement, Eternal Life. These are all on the face of it uncertainties; or let's say they are, at any rate, mysteries. So most of us might be content with tossing them off with *I'll know when I get there* sort of thing.

Yet there is nothing for the Christian which is uncertain or unreal about Jesus Christ; and nor for Jesus was there anything unreal or uncertain about God His Father and life in His presence.

So what has prompted this opening? Well, today's pretty gruesome account of the fate of Lazarus which doesn't make for pleasant reading; and for all that heaven and hell is hardly fashionable talk, and for all the story is pretty extreme, it likely leaves many of us with some uncomfortable questions about the time to come and judgement.

Lazarus is a self centred, self indulgent man of great wealth, dressed expensively, tossing the excesses of his meal to the ground to be retrieved by a sickly beggar at his feet. It's a horrible picture but the condemnation of the man was not that he was rich but that he did not notice nor care for the beggar. That he, Lazarus, was the centre of the world he inhabited and the rest of the world about him did not exist. And it was not until eternity stretched before him and he was confronted by the judgement of God that he was prepared to ask the favour of another. Being then, sadly, too late.

The passage ties up well with Luke's earlier parables on riches, on there being nothing secret that will not become known, and on those who've lived well enough for themselves but with scant regard for others. It ties in well too with today's reading from Paul's letter to Timothy in which he pulls no punches about the potential fate of those wanting to be rich. *If we have food and clothing we will be content with these*, Paul writes. *But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.*

For Paul, Jesus Christ's return in glory – which Paul expected to occur in his lifetime – and indeed the final judgement which would accompany that final return - held no fears for him. It's not alas given to all of us to be sustained by so great a confidence.

While I don't imagine any of us Christians expect the end of present times to occur in our lifetimes yet – and judgement aside - we do cling passionately, do we not, some might say we cling irrationally *pie in the sky when we die* sort of thing, to the idea of some sort of life after death, of an experience of Christ in glory?

And in defence of those who'd pour scorn on the Christian belief of life after death, of life everlasting, we do perhaps fall into the trap of over romanticising and embellishing what little Christ had to say about these things. For Christ in his teaching about heavenly things made little attempt to describe the indescribable.

*You will eat, bye and bye, In the glorious land above the sky! Work and pray, Live on hay, You'll get pie in the sky when you die!* Joe Hill's verse from *The Preacher and the Slave*.

I doubt many of us would dare take quite such a cavalier attitude for the fact is Jesus did strike warning notes not just in the Lazarus story today, but in references to sheep and goats, talking about outer darkness and about those who might find it hard to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. In Jesus' own words: *Many will try to enter and will not be able*.

And so are we left wondering, then, perhaps a little fearfully, about our own response to those warnings?

With daily reports of evil acts which would seem to be beyond comprehension in their awfulness, it's almost inevitable that we too should find ourselves thinking about heaven and about God's judgement of us all. About whether in due course we will be coming face to face with God and have to account for the way we've lived our lives. Of course it's all shrouded in mystery as I said at the start, though amongst the many *unprofitable* theories that abound about the nature of life after death, judgement and so on, one thing that *is* well supported by Christ's teaching is that the way life is led on earth, our relationships *now*, are what vitally affect the shape of things to come.

So, I like to think in terms not so much of future judgement, someone in due course ticking boxes, but more of a continuing present, of our being accountable *now* to our Father in Heaven, not falling into the trap of too little too late. Christ after all in his time on earth was concerned with the realities of the day, with bringing about God's Kingdom upon earth as something in the present and continuing into the future.

Myself, I'd prefer not to believe that God consigns anyone to Hell, whatever Hell may be, nor that there should be any permanent separation of sheep from goats. I don't believe that's how it works. I believe in a God of goodness and love and the nearest I can imagine Hell are those times we may experience of estrangement from God and of a total spiritual vacuum.

In a wonderful welcome leaflet at the back of the church, Richard talks about Christianity as a living encounter with Jesus. I like to think that, time on, that'll become for each of us a very *personal* encounter, even a blinding confrontation with the risen Christ, perhaps, such as Paul had, and a moment of total self revelation. And in that encounter as I am imagining it, and maybe this is heaven, we're offered unconditional love and forgiveness and life in the presence of God.

Let me end with some words from last week's Collect:

Almighty God, you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you. Pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself, and so bring us at last to your heavenly city where we shall see you face to face.

Amen