

Don't Miss The Boat

(Luke 16.19-31)

Grant Bullen

Introduction

There's a challenging tension in the gospel of Jesus... between the teaching that says *'God never ever gives up on us'* and the voice of urgency we hear in today's parable... A voice that says *'Come-on... wake-up and get cracking... because you don't want to miss out!'*

The Parable of the Rich Man and the Poor Man at his Gate

The parable is a simple tale of a rich man, about whom we are told nothing... except that *he* lives a life of luxury... while there's a poor man named Lazarus lying at his gate in bitter poverty. But when they both die, their fortunes are dramatically reversed. It is Lazarus who lives in God's Kingdom in comfort, while the rich man endures unspeakable torment in Hades. Seeing Lazarus with Abraham in the far distance, the Rich Man cries out to Abraham, beseeching him to send the Poor Man to quench his agony. Abraham, however, says it's not possible... it's too late now... the rich man had his chance in his former life, but he missed it, and now his fate is sealed.

So *how* did the rich man miss out? There's no mention of any sinful behaviour, *except* that he *was* a *rich man*... and every day he walked past the impoverished Lazarus, without doing anything to alleviate his suffering. Lazarus *was* his opportunity for redemption, and he failed to take it. He missed it... overlooked him... failed to see him and the gift he represented. And now it's too late.

The Rich Man accepts Abraham's ruling without dispute... Now his attention turns to the fate of his family. *'I've got 5 brothers living the same unaware lifestyle that I lived... Send Lazarus to warn them so they won't end up in this nightmare too!'*

(We need to 'press pause' for a moment... Up to this point the parable is following the pattern of a common folk tale of the day, where the fortunes of rich and poor persons are reversed in the after-life. We can imagine the crowd listening to Jesus nodding in recognition... *'Oh yeah... it's this story... I like this one.'* In the folk tale a messenger from 'heaven' *is* sent, and the living heed the warning and change their ways and it all ends happily ever after... But listen to what Jesus does instead. Back to the story...)

In Jesus' version Abraham *refuses* to send a messenger... saying that if his brothers are not prepared to listen to the warnings of the prophets, they're not going to be convinced *"even if someone 'returns' from the dead."* (31)

In Jesus' version this familiar story is given a new and disturbing conclusion... interrupting the 'comfortable' expectations of the listeners. And it becomes a parable of challenging urgency. *'Wake up! Make sure **you** don't miss the boat of God's salvation.'* And the eyes of Jesus fall on the crowd searching each person's heart with the unspoken question... *'And you... what will it take for you to be convinced?'*

The folk story becomes a disturbing tale of human resistance to the invitation of God. Notice that most of the weight falls on the second half of the parable, particularly the dialogue between Abraham and the Rich Man. Listen to it again in paraphrase.

*"Father Abraham, please send Lazarus to warn my five brothers so they won't end up here in this nightmare too." Abraham replied, "They have the teachings of Moses and the prophets. That should be all the warning they need." The rich man replied, "They're not listening though; but if someone was to come back from the dead to warn them, **then** they'd turn their lives around for sure." But Abraham said to him, "If they won't take notice of the prophets, then even someone 'returning' from the dead won't be enough to get through to them." (29-31)¹*

So what would get through to them? What would???

And look at us... our society ... with climbing rates of depression and deep personal dissatisfaction everywhere. What would convince people that *this* way of living is not working? What would convince people to try another way?

Indeed, what would it take to convince *me*? That's the pointy end of the parable!

Affluence

It's a parable about our human resistance to the invitation of God. And in it perhaps we hear the weary reflection of Jesus... *'It doesn't matter what God says or does... most people just don't want to respond.'* The blindness of people to the reality of God's love, just staring them in the face, is one of Jesus' most repetitive themes. How come people can't see?

Uncomfortably for us, Luke's Gospel says it's *affluence*... that's the blockage. We all remember... *"It is easier for a camel to enter through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God."* It's the same teaching in this parable... There's no mention of sinful behaviour associated with the Rich Man and his brothers. Their blindness to God's invitation comes from one source... affluence. Riches are the problem, because they inevitably distracts us from what really matters. Money always sets itself up as an 'idol', that prevents us from concentrating on that which can bring us genuine life. Affluence blinds us to the opportunity right before our eyes.

Certainly this is how the Early Church understood the gospel. Listen to the advice given to new Christians in today's epistle...

'People who set their hearts on becoming wealthy are their own worst enemies. They charge headlong into a minefield of inflated expectations and mind-numbing promises, and they are easily seduced onto slippery slopes that end only in corruption and ruin. There are so many forms of evil that can be traced back to a passion for money, and there have been so many people whose craving for wealth has eroded their commitment to Christ and brought them nothing but pain and misery.' (1 Timothy 6.9-10)ⁱ

Is affluence the cause of blindness in *our* lives? Does it feed our human resistance to God's call? Is this what we're up against? Always so busy... so consumed by all those things that we *must do... must achieve*. And somehow at the same time... so self-focused... so blind to the suffering of the world around us. Is affluence, which promised so much, really a curse not a blessing?

Whatever the cause, we live with the reality of this incredible resistance to wholeheartedly embracing the way of Jesus. There's always something we need to do first. Always some reason why this isn't the right day, week or year for being faithful. Always something... and the invitation to God's party of life gets lost... Will we wake up feeling cold and empty one day saying... *'What happened? Where did life go?'*

It's not that God will lose patience with us one day – that's *not* what the parable's about – but rather that *we'll* get so absorbed with everything else, so habituated to saying *'not now'*... that when the *cold days* come (as they inevitably must), we'll be so habituated to blindness that we won't be able to see anymore. That the golden opportunity will be right there in front of us... and yet for all our desperation, we won't be able to see it!

Conclusion

Imagine Jesus telling this story in a village square. Most of the crowd walk away saying, *'Great story, but pity he changed the ending. I wonder why he did that?'* But there are a few (just a few) who get it and return to their homes with the subversive question... *'I wonder what it would take to convince me?'* And maybe (just maybe) there's one who rules his/her line in the sand and says... *'That's it... enough excuses... I'm committing myself to the way of faith... here and now... today!'*

ⁱ Nathan Nettleton, *Laughing Bird*

ⁱⁱ *ibid*